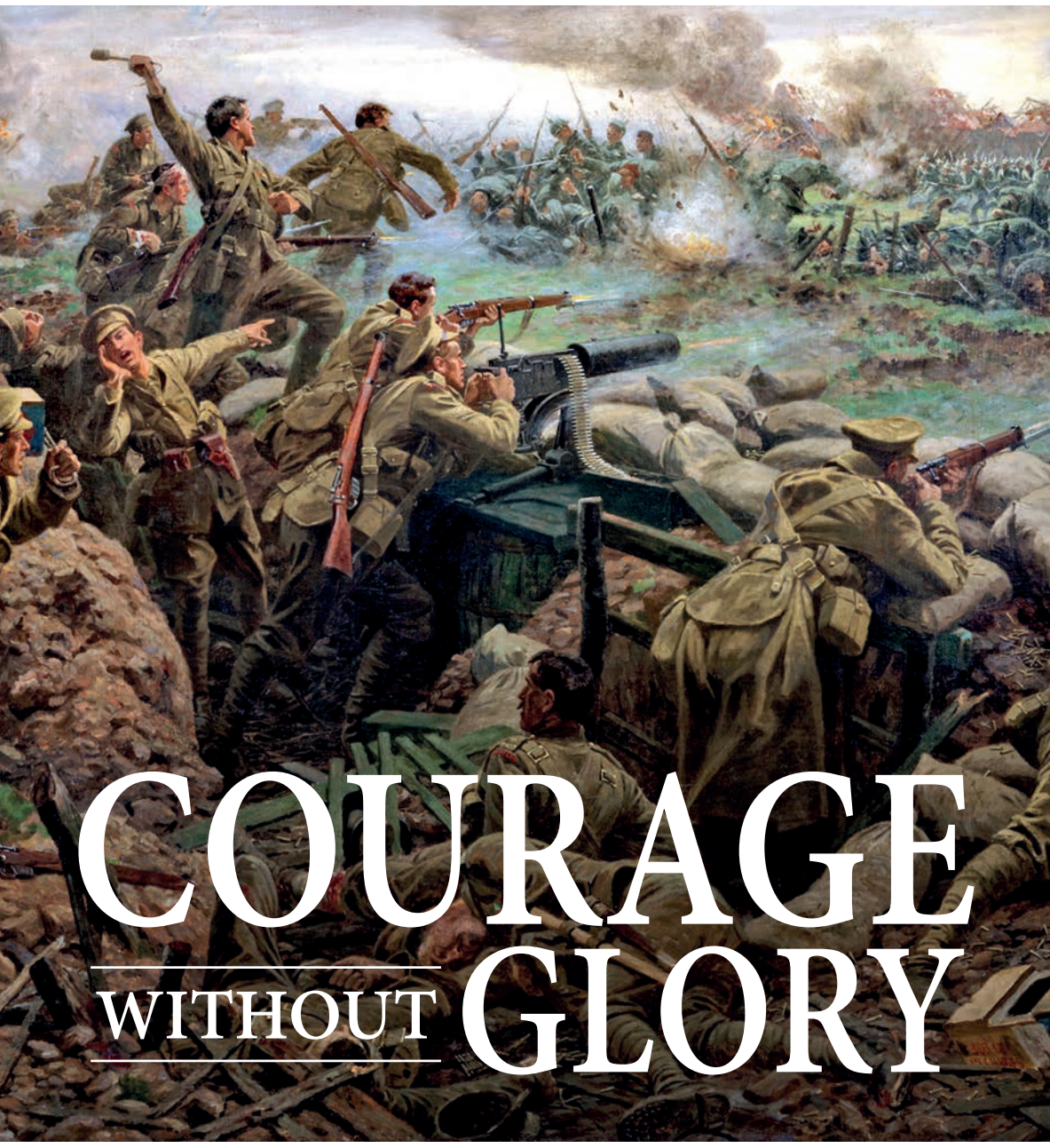

COURAGE WITHOUT GLORY

THE BRITISH ARMY ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1915

SPENCER JONES *(editor)*

FOREWORD BY PROFESSOR BRIAN BOND

COURAGE WITHOUT GLORY

Courage Without Glory

The British Army on the Western Front 1915

Wolverhampton Military Studies No.10

Edited by Spencer Jones

Helion & Company Limited

To my parents
Sheila and Victor
With love

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Front cover: 'The Canadians at Ypres' – Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry at Bellewaarde Ridge, 8 May 1915, by William Barnes Wollen, courtesy of PPCLI Regimental Museum at the Museum of the Regiments in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

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Contents

List of Illustrations vii
List of Maps xi
Abbreviations xii
Notes on Contributors xiv
Series Editor's Preface xviii
Foreword by Professor Brian Bond xxi
Acknowledgements xxii

Introduction: The Forgotten Year xxiv
Spencer Jones

1 "To make war as we must, and not as we should like": The British Army and the Problem of the Western Front, 1915 31
Spencer Jones
2 The Supply of Munitions to the Army, 1915 56
John Mason Sneddon
3 Friends Disunited: Johnnie French, Wully Robertson and 'K of K' in 1915 80
John Spencer
4 Henry Horne as Divisional Commander 103
Simon Robbins
5 The BEF Takes Off: The Royal Flying Corps, 1915 125
Peter Hart
6 British-Indian Army Cavalry: From Mobilisation to the Western Front 1915 146
Graham Winton
7 Douglas Haig and the Planning of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle 183
Patrick Watt
8 Inescapable Realities: Canadian Command, Spring 1915 204
Kenneth Radley
9 Death of a Battalion: The 5th King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment at the Second Battle of Ypres 228
Tom Williams

10 The Battle of Festubert 258
Robert Williams
11 "Seven Days in Hell": The 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment at the Battle of Festubert, May 1915 282
Adrian Gregson
12 "A Coda to the Second Battle of Ypres": International Trench, 6-10 July 1915 312
Michael LoCicero
13 "A Great Victory All But Gained": The Battle of Loos, 1915 361
Brian Curragh
14 8th Division and the Action at Bois Grenier, 25 September 1915 390
Alun Thomas
15 Gas, Grenades and Grievances: The Attack on the Hohenzollern Redoubt by 46th (North Midland) Division, 13 October 1915 408
Michael Woods

Index 437

List of Illustrations

A French postcard celebrating the alliance between Britain and France. The pressing need to support French offensives constrained the British Army's freedom of action in 1915. (Editor's collection) 33

A French patriotic postcard portraying the soldiers of the British Empire. In 1915 the British Army on the Western Front consisted of a mixture of British Regulars, Territorials and New Army units, as well as divisions drawn from India and Canada. (Editor's collection) 43

A group of concealed 60-pounder guns. These modern weapons were in desperately short supply in 1915. (Editor's collection) 52

Leach Catapult in action. (Editor's collection). 67

Martin Hales and his patented rifle grenade. (*The War Illustrated*, 3 April 1915) 69

A diagram of the No.15 Ball Grenade. The need to physically light the fuse before throwing proved a serious drawback. (Author's collection) 72

Wilfred Stokes demonstrating his trench mortar. (Editor's collection) 78

Sir John French. (Editor's collection) 81

Lord Kitchener of Khartoum. (Editor's collection) 91

Sir William Robertson. (Editor's collection) 95

Sir Henry Horne. (Bain Collection, Library of Congress) 104

With the high command summer 1915. From right to left: Lieutenant-General Sir Hubert Gough, Major-General Sir Henry Wilson, Major-General Henry Horne, Major-General Thompson Capper, General Sir Douglas Haig, Général Joseph Joffre, Field Marshal Sir John French. (Editor's collection) 115

A British B.E.2c. The stability of the aircraft in flight made it ideal for reconnaissance and artillery observation, but proved a serious weakness in aerial combat. (Editor's Collection) 134

A Vickers Fighter (F.B.5, also known as the 'Gunbus') attacking a German Taube reconnaissance aeroplane. The Vickers Fighter was the first purpose built British fighter aircraft, but proved slow and mechanically unreliable. (Editor's Collection) 137

A prototype Fokker Eindecker. The Eindecker was the first plane to possess an interrupter gear that allowed the pilot to fire through the propeller. The speed, maneuverability and firepower of these new aircraft revolutionised air-to-air combat and created the sensational "Fokker Scourge". (Editor's Collection) 143
2nd Lt. Basil Carver, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons: 1896–1916. Killed in action at the Somme 21 August, aged 21. (Janet Yarwood) 148
1st Indian Cavalry Division: Trench dispositions August–September, 1915 in X Corps area. (TNA: WO 95/1167, 1st Indian Cavalry Division War Diary). 166
A troop of Jodhpur Lancers coming into action dismounted; Linghem, France 28 July 1915. This is probably a training photograph to be used for propaganda purposes. (British Library: Girdwood Collection 24-150) 173
Sir Douglas Haig, commanding First Army. (Editor's collection) 185
Sir Henry Rawlinson, commanding IV Corps. (Editor's collection) 187
Sir Thompson Capper, commanding 7th Division. (Editor's collection) 191
Sir Francis 'Joey' Davies, commanding 8th Division. (Editor's collection) 194
Lieutenant General Sir R.E.W. Turner GOC 3rd Brigade at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-008278) 210
Major General Sir D. Watson CO 2nd Battalion at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-002116) 210
Brigadier General G. Tuxford CO 5th Battalion at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-002805) 210
Brigadier General F.O.W. Loomis CO 13th Battalion at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-002192) 210
Brigadier General V.W. Odlum CO 7th Battalion at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-2117) 216
Lieutenant General Sir A. Currie GOC 2nd Brigade at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-1370) 216
Major General L. Lipsett CO 8th Battalion at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-7442) 216
Lieutenant General Sir E.A.H. Alderson GOC 1st Canadian Division at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-5592) 216
Group of 1/5th King's Own Royal Lancaster officers in 1914. Most of the seated front rank are wearing swords. (KO-0439/63) 230
Soldiers of the 1/5th King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment strike a bold pose on the Great Western Railway near Didcot. The background structure is probably a temporary guard duty billet. The battalion spent the first four months of the war engaged in the tedious business of railway sentry duty. (KO. Neg/0173) 234

Captain Eaves and Captain Fawcett enjoying some quiet time in the Kemmel trenches. Both officers came out with the 1/5th Royal Lancasters. Eaves commanded 'C' Company at the outset of war. He would assume battalion command during May and June 1915 when Colonel Cavendish was wounded and Major Bates invalided to Great Britain. (KO-0784/103) 237

Shrapnel bursting near Zonnebeke. The trenches in these early days were rudimentary breastwork positions constructed of sandbags and timber. The trees are still standing and in leaf. The soldier in the lower right has a 1/5th King's Own brass shoulder title. (KO-0784/047) 240

A group of soldiers pose for the camera in the same trench. It must be assumed the shelling had ceased, as there appears to be little protection from shrapnel bursts. (KO-0784/050) 240

Other ranks of 1/5th King's Own Royal Lancaster relaxing in the Zonnebeke trenches. Note the variety of soft headgear. Such diversity in uniforms and equipment was symptomatic of the BEF as a whole throughout 1915. (KO-0784-049) 244

Artists impression of Indian soldiers charging into action at Festubert. (Editor's collection) 266

2/Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (5th Brigade, 2nd Division) three days prior to the opening of the Battle of Festubert. The battalion sustained over 700 casualties killed, wounded and missing during subsequent operations. (The Inniskillings Museum) 266

Lieutenant John Smyth, 15th Ludhiana Sikhs, Lahore Division bringing a supply of grenades forward under fire on 18 May 1915. Smyth was awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery. Maintaining a supply of grenades for troops engaged in close combat proved a persistent problem during the Battle of Festubert. (*The War Illustrated*, August 1915) 277

Festubert May 1915: Seated below a captured portion of the German front-line, a British Tommy gazes across no man's land. (Editor's collection) 279

A group of men from 1/7th King's, presumably the 'Formby Company'. (*Formby Times*, 17 April 1915, p.3) 283

Photograph of 1/7th King's, allegedly taken during combat, and printed on the front page of the *Daily Sketch*, 1 June 1915. (Author's collection) 290

2898 Private Bobby Mercer, killed on 17 May 1915. Mercer is commemorated on the Le Touret Memorial, Panels 6-8. (*Formby Times*, 5 June, 1915, p.5) 295

2175 Private Robert Balshaw, who died of wounds on 20 May 1915. Balshaw is buried at Boulogne Eastern Cemetery, grave VIII.D.31. (*Formby Times*, 5 June, 1915, p.5) 295

2nd Lancashire Fusiliers in canal bank trenches June 1915. (Aurel Sercu) 316

International Trench and vicinity from the air July 1915. (TNA: WO 95/1489) 319
Major-General H.F.M. Wilson GOC 4th Division. (Author's collection) 323
Brigadier-General C.B. Prowse GOC 11th Brigade. (*Illustrated London News*, 22 July 1916) 327
2nd Lieutenant Robinson's drawings of the hidden gun position. (TNA: WO 95/1455) 336
International Trench (line of raised earth running away from camera to the right) following capture. Sandbagged breastworks denoting the new British forward position trail off to the left. (Jon Cooksey) 352
February 1916: Forlorn British Tommies of 20th (Light) Division taken captive during fighting for the 'F' series of trenches encompassing International Trench and vicinity. *52nd RD* staff officer Rudolph Binding (*A Fatalist at War*, 1929, p. 92) was unimpressed by these tangible representatives of the New Army: "Crooked legs, rickety, alcoholic, degenerate, ill-bred, and poor to the last degree. If these are 'Kitchener's', one can understand the effort to get other elements than this venal rubbish into the army by forced recruiting, otherwise conscription." (Author's collection) 359
Panoramas of the Loos battlefield prior to the offensive. (Paul Reed) 364
British soldier wearing a 1915 issue smoke helmet. (*Illustrated London News*, 11 December 1915) 376
Contemporary artist's impression of 15th (Scottish) Division troops storming German trenches on the opening day of the Loos offensive. (*Illustrated London News*, 9 October 1915) 380
Captured at Loos: German field guns on public display at Horse Guards Parade. (*The War Illustrated*, 13 November 1915) 387
Aubers Ridge 9 May 1915: Men of 2nd Lincolnshire Regiment (25th Brigade) move forward through a crater occupied by British and German wounded. (Editor's collection) 394
British trenches: Bois Grenier August 1915. (NAM 2003-03-7-95) 399
Bridoux Salient and German frontline from the air prior to the 25 September assault. (Author's collection) 402
Hohenzollern Redoubt from the air. (Editor's collection) 412
Major-General Edward James Montagu Stuart-Wortley GOC 46th (North Midland) Division. (Editor's collection) 417
Lieutenant General Sir Richard Haking (on horseback second from right) GOC XI Corps in 1913. (Editor's collection) 430

List of Maps

In colour section

Maps © Barbara Taylor 2015

General Key		i
1	Western Front 1915	ii
2	First Army Offensives	iii
3	Neuve Chapelle	iv
4	Aubers Ridge	v
5	Festubert A	vi
6	Festubert B	vii
7	Second Battle of Ypres A	viii
8	Second Battle of Ypres B	ix
9	Second Battle of Ypres C	x
10	Boesinghe	xi
11	11st Indian Cavalry Division, August – September 1915	xii
12	Loos A	xiii
13	Loos B	xiv
14	Bois Grenier	xv
15	Hohenzollern Redoubt	xvi

Abbreviations

AA	Assistant Adjutant
ADC	Aide de Camp
AG	Adjutant General
AQMG	Assistant Quarter-Master General
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BM	Brigade Major
CAS	Chief of the Air Staff
CB	Companion of the Order of the Bath
CFS	Central Flying School
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
CinC	Commander in Chief
CO	Commanding Officer
CoS	Chief of Staff
CRA	Commander, Royal Artillery
CRE	Commander, Royal Engineers
DAAG	Deputy-Assistant Adjutant General
DGMA	Director General of Military Aeronautics
DMA	Director of Military Aeronautics
DMO	Director of Military Operations
DMT	Director of Military Training
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
EEF	Egyptian Expeditionary Force
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GQG	Grand Quartier Général [General Headquarters of the French Army]
GS	General Staff
GSO	General Staff Officer [numerical designation indicates grade, e.g. GSO1]
HLI	Highland Light Infantry
IAC	Indian Army Corps
ICC	Indian Cavalry Corps
IEF	Indian Expeditionary Force

IGC	Inspector General of Communications
IGS	Imperial General Staff
KCMG	Knight Commander of the Order of St. Michael & St. George
LoC	Line of Communication
MGGS	Major-General, General Staff
MW	Military Wing [of the Royal Flying Corps]
NCO	Non Commissioned Officer
OH	[British] Official History
QF	Quick Firing [Artillery gun]
QMG	Quarter-Master General
RA	Royal Artillery
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
RE	Royal Engineers
RFA	Royal Field Artillery
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RGA	Royal Garrison Artillery
RHA	Royal Horse Artillery
RIR	*Reserve Infanterie-Regiment* [German Army]
TF	Territorial Force
VC	Victoria Cross
WO	War Office

Notes on Contributors

Brian Curragh graduated with distinction in 2012 from the University of Birmingham's Centre for War Studies MA in British First World War Studies programme. His dissertation was entitled "The Queen's Own Oxfordshire Hussars – "agricultural cavalry" or an elite unit?" He also won the Max Rosen Essay Prize for his essay "How important were tanks to British military success in the Hundred Days?" In 2013, Brian contributed a chapter on Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson to *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914*. When not studying the First World War, Brian is the Group Finance Director of a property development company in Hertfordshire.

Adrian Gregson grew up on the Lancashire coast and studied History and Archives at Leicester and then Liverpool Universities. His PhD thesis "The 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment and the Great War – the experience of a Territorial Battalion and its Home Towns" was awarded in 2004 from the University of Worcester. Adrian has written articles on the 55th West Lancashire Division and also on the British League of Help. He is currently Archives Policy and Collections Manager for Worcestershire County Council Archive and Archaeology Service, and Worcester Diocesan Archivist based at The Hive. In 2014 he published the book *Worcestershire's War*, with Maggie Andrews and John Peters.

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Spencer Jones is Senior Lecturer in Armed Forces and War Studies at the University of Wolverhampton, and currently serves as the Regimental Historian of the Royal Regiment of Artillery. His previous publications include *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army 1902–1914* (2012) and *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914* (2013), which was runner up for the 2013 Templer Medal. He has also written the short history *The Great Retreat of*

1914: From Mons to the Marne (2014) and was co-editor (with Peter Tsouras) of *Over the Top: Alternate Histories of the First World War* (2014).

Michael Stephen LoCicero is an independent scholar and Helion commissioning editor who earned his PhD at the University of Birmingham in 2011. Previously employed as a contracted researcher by the National Archives and Soldiers of Oxfordshire Trust, he is currently engaged in a wide-ranging number of academic and editorial activities including advisement for the University of Birmingham's respected MA programme. His publications include a chapter on Brigadier-General Edward Bulfin in the highly regarded Spencer Jones (ed) *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914* (2013) and *A Moonlight Massacre: The Night Operation on the Passchendaele Ridge, 2 December 1917* (2014).

Lt Col (Retired) **Kenneth Radley** is a former officer of The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada. He holds a doctorate in Canadian History from Carleton University, Ottawa, and is a graduate of the Canadian Forces Command and Staff College, Toronto. He is the author of *Rebel Watchdog: The Confederate States Army Provost Guard* (1989 and paperback edition 1997), *We Lead Others Follow: First Canadian Division 1914-1918* (2006) and *Get Tough, Stay Tough: Shaping the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (2014) which was nominated for the Templer Medal. He is also a contributor to the *Encyclopedia of the Confederacy* (1993). At present, he is working on another unexplored aspect of the Canadian Army's effort and accomplishments during the Great War.

Simon Robbins, is Senior Archivist in the Department of Research at the Imperial War Museums and studied History at Nottingham University and War Studies at King's College London. He is the author of *British Generalship on the Western Front, 1914-18: Defeat Into Victory* (runner-up for the 2004 Templer Medal), *The First World War Letters of General Lord Horne*, and *British Generalship during the Great War: The Military Career of Sir Henry Horne (1861-1929*) and co-author of *Staff Officer, the Diaries of Walter Guinness (First Lord Moyne), 1914-18*; *Haig's Generals*; and *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914* (runner-up for the 2013 Templer Medal). His book, *Dirty Wars: A Century of Counterinsurgency* is forthcoming in 2016 and he is currently researching 'British Army Training on the Western Front 1914-1918' which will be published by Helion in 2017.

John M. Sneddon has a life-long interest in 1914-18 and, following retirement, studied for an MA in British First World War Studies at the University of Birmingham. A career in scientific research and university teaching influences the way he approaches his research into the Great War, namely a passion to get at 'the truth' by tracking down as many original sources as possible and carefully sifting the secondary accounts. His major areas of research is the period August 1914 to December 1915 and he subscribes to the view that the study of 1915 is the key to understanding the evolution of the military effectiveness of the BEF into the war winning army of 1918. His published

works include *The Devil's Carnival* (2012), a study of 1st Northumberland Fusiliers in 1914, and 'The Company Commander' in S. Jones (ed.) *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914* (2013). He is currently working on a history of the Trench Warfare Department 1914-1918.

John Spencer completed his MA in First World War Studies at the University of Birmingham in 2010; he also has a BA in International Relations and History from the University of Lancaster. Since 1980 he has been a journalist and media executive. For 13 years he held the post of Managing Editor of the Press Association, the national news agency for Britain and Ireland. He is now a freelance travel writer, media policy consultant, and First World War enthusiast. He is a specialist on the early career of Sir William Robertson. His chapter on Robertson in 1914 appeared in *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the BEF in 1914* (2013). He is currently researching the career of Sir Henry Wilson.

Alun Thomas completed his doctoral research in 2010. He is especially interested in operational analysis of the BEF in the First World War. After teaching in a West Midlands comprehensive school for seven years, he served in the West Midlands Police for twenty-five years, and has also worked as Visiting Lecturer for the Uniformed Services (Police) course at the University of Wolverhampton. He has presented on the British Upper Silesia Force to the Annual Conference of Irish Association of Russian, Central and East European Studies in Dublin in 2014. Alun Thomas is the author of 'Open Warfare during the 'Hundred Days' – 1918', *Stand To! The Journal of the Western Front Association, No. 96* (January 2013) and is a regular book reviewer for the *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, the Western Front Association's digital magazine and for the Centre for First World War Studies at the University of Birmingham. He lives with his family on Cannock Chase in Staffordshire.

Patrick Watt is a doctoral candidate at the Centre for the Study of Modern Conflict at the University of Edinburgh. His forthcoming thesis examines organisational leadership and culture in the British First Army in 1915. His first book, *Steel & Tartan*, was published by Spellmount in 2012 and he has contributed articles to the International Review of Scottish Studies and the Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research. Patrick is the Douglas Haig Fellowship's Haig Scholar for 2014 and a University of Edinburgh McMillan Scholar for 2014-15.

Robert Williams has been interested in military history since his schooldays at Solihull School. He studied Modern History at Liverpool University before joining the police force, spending 30 years policing the West Midlands. He is the founder of the West Midlands Police Military History Society and holds an MPhil, gained under the supervision of John Bourne at Birmingham University, entitled 'Social and Military History of the 1/8th Battalion, the Royal Warwickshire Regiment in the Great War'. His interest in Festubert stems from discovering his maternal grandfather

had a brother (John Mills) who died in the night attack with 2nd Worcestershires and another brother (Walter) who was wounded two days later with 2nd South Staffs.

Tom Williams is a retired Biomedical Scientist who worked in research, medical and veterinary pathology before establishing an independent diagnostic and analytical laboratory. A life-long interest in the Great World War led to the study and completion of the MA in First World War Studies at Birmingham University. His research interests centre on the training of the pre-war Territorial Force and their experience and performance before the arrival of the Kitchener Armies.

Graham Winton (PhD, FRHistS, FRGS), retired in 2008 as Principal of an Adult Education College to concentrate on research, publishing and lecturing. A part-time tutor with the University of Cambridge Institute of Continuing Education for over twenty years, he has lectured in the USA and extensively in Britain on military and landscape history, particularly relating to the First World War. He has written widely on military horses, army remounts and veterinary services, recently publishing *Theirs Not To Reason Why: Horsing the British Army 1875-1925* (Helion, 2014). He has also appeared on BBC Radio and Television programmes relating to horses in the First World War.

Michael Woods is a serving police officer with Leicestershire Police. He was taught by the editor, alongside Professor Gary Sheffield, whilst undertaking his Master's degree in British First World War Studies at the University of Birmingham. His chapter is based upon his final dissertation. He chose to write about the attack after discovering his great uncle, Private 2082 Yates, served with the Fourth Battalion of the Lincolnshire Regiment and was shot through the knee during the battle. (Following his recovery, Yates, along with many other Lincolshire men, went on to join the Second Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment and fought at Arras, Third Ypres and then in Italy as part of 7th Division). Michael is now undertaking a PhD at the University of Wolverhampton, being supervised by Professor Stephen Badsey. He continues to research the year 1915 and his thesis will be an in-depth study of the Battle of Festubert.

The Wolverhampton Military Studies Series
Series Editor's Preface

As series editor, it is my great pleasure to introduce the *Wolverhampton Military Studies Series* to you. Our intention is that in this series of books you will find military history that is new and innovative, and academically rigorous with a strong basis in fact and in analytical research, but also is the kind of military history that is for all readers, whatever their particular interests, or their level of interest in the subject. To paraphrase an old aphorism: a military history book is not less important just because it is popular, and it is not more scholarly just because it is dull. With every one of our publications we want to bring you the kind of military history that you will want to read simply because it is a good and well-written book, as well as bringing new light, new perspectives, and new factual evidence to its subject.

In devising the *Wolverhampton Military Studies Series*, we gave much thought to the series title: this is a *military* series. We take the view that history is everything except the things that have not happened yet, and even then a good book about the military aspects of the future would find its way into this series. We are not bound to any particular time period or cut-off date. Writing military history often divides quite sharply into eras, from the modern through the early modern to the mediaeval and ancient; and into regions or continents, with a division between western military history and the military history of other countries and cultures being particularly marked. Inevitably, we have had to start somewhere, and the first books of the series deal with British military topics and events of the twentieth century and later nineteenth century. But this series is open to any book that challenges received and accepted ideas about any aspect of military history, and does so in a way that encourages its readers to enjoy the discovery.

In the same way, this series is not limited to being about wars, or about grand strategy, or wider defence matters, or the sociology of armed forces as institutions, or civilian society and culture at war. None of these are specifically excluded, and in some cases they play an important part in the books that comprise our series. But there are already many books in existence, some of them of the highest scholarly standards, which cater to these particular approaches. The main theme of the *Wolverhampton Military Studies Series* is the military aspects of wars, the preparation for wars or their prevention, and their aftermath. This includes some books whose main theme is the

technical details of how armed forces have worked, some books on wars and battles, and some books that re-examine the evidence about the existing stories, to show in a different light what everyone thought they already knew and understood.

As series editor, together with my fellow editorial board members, and our publisher Duncan Rogers of Helion, I have found that we have known immediately and almost by instinct the kind of books that fit within this series. They are very much the kind of well-written and challenging books that my students at the University of Wolverhampton would want to read. They are books which enhance knowledge, and offer new perspectives. Also, they are books for anyone with an interest in military history and events, from expert scholars to occasional readers. One of the great benefits of the study of military history is that it includes a large and often committed section of the wider population, who want to read the best military history that they can find; our aim for this series is to provide it.

Stephen Badsey
University of Wolverhampton

Foreword

As the editor of this important volume reminds us, the Western Front in 1915 is a 'forgotten year' as regards the British Army's experience; the year remains noticeable only for the brevity of its historiography. The second year on the Western Front has suffered, in its appeal to historians, because it was less dramatic than the opening months of the conflict in summer 1914 or the tremendous, romantic, and still controversial Gallipoli campaign. More recently the attritional Somme campaign, and especially its catastrophic first day, has exerted an obsessive attraction for popular attention in the media, even to the temporary eclipse of Ypres, where the British Army made its greatest efforts, and losses, for the greater part of the war.

The contributors to this stimulating volume do not gloss over the comparatively small scale of the British battles of 1915 or downplay the shortcomings and failures, particularly at Loos, where casualties on the first day were as severe as 1 July 1916 in proportion to the numbers engaged. But these authors present a more objective and nuanced interpretation than the polemics of Alan Clark, John Laffin and, most deplorably, Lloyd George.

The fifteen essays which comprise this volume will go a long way to putting the British Army's role in 1915 firmly on the map. The battles of Neuve Chapelle, Second Ypres, Festubert and, above all, Loos, receive thorough reappraisals, and there are useful studies of vital auxiliary aspects such as the supply of munitions, the Royal Flying Corps, the British-Indian cavalry and the early use of gas. There is also an appealing juxtaposition between large-scale operations and case studies of the roles of smaller units such as the 'death of a battalion' at the Second Battle of Ypres. The editor makes a challenging claim that 'the fighting of 1915 shaped the evolution of the British Army for the remainder of the war', whereas other scholars, including Gary Sheffield, have recently suggested that the real watershed occurred during the Battle of the Somme. This larger issue will doubtless be debated in a later volume of this series.

What impresses me, as someone who retired more than a decade ago, is the arrival of a new generation of scholars of proven ability and admirable dedication to their chosen subjects who are transforming our knowledge of the First World War. They have been well served by a supportive and enthusiastic publisher, Duncan Rogers.

Professor Brian Bond

Acknowledgements

The origin of this book lies with the success of *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914*. Inspired by the jubilant atmosphere that accompanied the book launch event at the University of Wolverhampton in December 2013, I received verbal agreements from several of the original authors that they were not merely willing, but positively keen to contribute to a new collection. In the following weeks I worked with Duncan Rogers and Michael LoCicero to plan out the final shape of the book and identify additional authors. Originally planned as a much smaller volume than *Stemming the Tide*, the project soon took on a life of its own and the book you now hold is actually somewhat larger than its predecessor!

As with any edited collection, the first and foremost acknowledgement must always go to the contributors. I am indebted to them for their hard work and enthusiasm for the project. In addition, a special mention must be made of Duncan Rogers, owner of Helion & Co., who has supported the book from inception to completion with his usual blend of practical assistance and boundless enthusiasm.

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As ever, I owe sincere thanks to my friends, especially Andy, Jon, Leeann (and Alex), Martyn, Deb, Jake and Helen. They endured my over-enthusiastic descriptions of new archival finds, listened to my grumbles about drafting and re-drafting, and above all, kept me smiling throughout. Particular thanks are owed to Jon for scanning many of the images in this volume, and for Andy, Jake and Helen for actually purchasing my previous books! I also owe a very special thank you to Mia for all her care, encouragement and kindness.

Last, and by no means least, I owe an imperishable debt to my parents. The book has a special resonance as it was completed during a time of considerable upheaval and change in my life. Throughout this period my parents provided a constant source of love, kindness and support. The work would not have been possible without them.

Introduction: The Forgotten Year

Spencer Jones

It is inevitable that in a struggle of the scale, duration and intensity of the First World War certain events will become obscured from history. The conflict is replete with forgotten battles, campaigns and even entire fronts of the war. Within this context the British Army's experiences on the Western Front in 1915 fall into the category of a forgotten year. Caught between the dramatic war of movement that characterised 1914 and the enormous scale of the Battle of the Somme in 1916, the year has attracted little attention from historians. British offensive efforts have been dismissed as "insignificant", "niggardly in scale and short in duration" or nothing more than a "medium-scale raid".[1] Perhaps reflecting their size, the battles of 1915 have left little mark on the public consciousness. The Battle of Neuve Chapelle possesses a small degree of public recognition,[2] and the Battle of Loos rather more, but engagements such as Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Second Givenchy are almost entirely disremembered.[3] Lack of public interest is reflected by the scarcity of available literature on the topic. Indeed, such is the dearth of material that it prompted Nick Lloyd to comment "1915 remains noticeable only by its absence from the historiography."[4]

This deficiency is unfortunate, for the events and experiences of 1915 would set the terms for the war on the Western Front for the remainder of the conflict. The

1 Nick Lloyd, "With Faith and Without Fear": Sir Douglas Haig's Command of First Army during 1915', *The Journal of Military History,* Vol.71, No.4, 2007, p.1053; Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack 1916-18* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994), p.14; Jonathan Krause, 'The French Battle for Vimy Ridge, 1915', *Journal of Military History*, Vol.77, No.1, 2013, p.92.

2 A short feature on Indian soldiers at this engagement was broadcast on the BBC Six O'Clock News on 10 March 2015.

3 A handful of modern books have been written on the battles of 1915, for example Adrian Bristow, *A Serious Disappointment*: *The Battle of Aubers Ridge, 1915 and the subsequent Munitions Scandal* (London, Leo Cooper, 1995); John Dixon, *Magnificent but Not War: The Second Battle of Ypres 1915* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2003); John Lee, *The Gas Attack: Ypres 1915* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword 2009) and Carole McEntee-Taylor, *The Battle of Bellewaarde, June 1915* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2014). There have been no major published studies of the Battle of Festubert aside from the account in the *Official History*.

4 Lloyd, 'Haig's Command of First Army', p.1053.

year was characterised by the development of defences, the evolution of offensive methods and the intensification of effort. 1915 began with armies occupying crude, shallow trenches screened by small amounts of barbed wire, assault tactics were little advanced from pre-war thinking, relying primarily on "bombard and storm" methods, and many officers believed that the stalemate would be broken as soon as the weather improved. Within a year the Western Front had been transformed. The trench lines, now effectively permanent, had markedly developed in strength and sophistication. Positions were arrayed in depth, linked by a network of communications trenches and shielded from attackers by a dense maze of barbed wire. To break down these formidable defences the attackers relied upon prolonged, methodical bombardments undertaken over several days by hundreds of artillery pieces. Whereas at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle in March the British Army had employed a preparatory bombardment lasting just 35 minutes, at the Battle of Loos in September the Royal Artillery spent four days pounding the German defences before the attack was launched. Providing the ammunition required for such sustained efforts required an unprecedented degree of economic mobilisation, and still more would be needed as the scale of battle inexorably increased.

In military terms 1915 would prove bitterly disappointing for the Allied cause. Enormous French offensives singularly failed to evict the invader and came at an appalling cost in lives.[5] The British Army, compelled to launch attacks of its own to assist its ally, fared no better. The tactical advantages possessed by the German defenders proved decisive. Trenches provided relative safety from bombardment and concealed machine-guns proved immune to all but the most accurate high explosive fire. Once the barrage lifted and the attackers went 'over the top' they were met with a hail of bullets as they struggled across the open ground of no-man's land. The arrangement of German defences in depth meant that the capture of the first line of trenches – often at a high cost in lives – was merely a precursor to a chaotic assault on the second or third German line which would take place without the benefit of close artillery support. In such circumstances breakthrough was all but impossible. Indeed, simply holding hard won gains in the face of relentless German counter-attacks proved a stern test. With every new battle the Allies sought to improve their methods, but innovations introduced by the attackers inevitably produced countermeasures from the German defenders that ensured they maintained an advantage.

The fighting of 1915 shaped the evolution of the British Army for the remainder of the war. The scale of the change should not be underestimated. By the end of the year the British Expeditionary Force had developed from the battle-scarred remains of the Regular divisions that had begun the conflict, into a true "citizen's army" where wartime volunteers came to outnumber pre-war Regulars and Territorials. Forced to learn in the field, the British Army pioneered many innovations that would become

5 For a detailed study of French efforts, see Jonathan Krause, *Early Trench Tactics in the French Army: The Second Battle of Artois, May-June 1915* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2013).

standard practice in 1916–1918. By the end of 1915 a recognisably modern and moderately effective "art of attack" had been developed that could usually be relied upon to break into German lines, although the much sought after breakthrough proved elusive.[6] Indeed, Nick Lloyd has identified the fact that, for the British Army, 1915 was "a year of real importance".[7] Yet, despite its significance, it remains remarkably understudied.

Part of the reason for the neglect of the Western Front lies in the fact that the Anglophone historiography of 1915 has traditionally focused upon the great drama of the Dardanelles campaign. The role of Gallipoli in the development of Australian and Turkish national identity has resulted in the campaign being immortalised in music, literature and film, greatly elevating public interest. In Britain, the combination of an amphibious operation on distant shores and the tantalising possibility of war ending victory has held the imagination for more than a century.[8]

In stark contrast there was little hope of decisive victory on the Western Front in 1915. Short of experience, manpower and firepower, the British Army made scant impression on the German defences. David Lloyd George, who at the time believed the war could best be won by fighting in the Balkans or the Near East, later cursed "the billy-goat tactics of western generals in butting away the strength of their armies against unbreakable walls … in a succession of sickening thuds".[9] Although the level of British commitment was small compared to 1916–1918, proportionately the casualties were exceedingly heavy. For example, it has been calculated that the number of fatalities per division was fractionally higher at the opening day of the Battle of Loos than on the first day of the Battle of Somme.[10]

When writing the *Official History* Sir James Edmonds made no attempt to conceal the heavy cost of these battles. In his preface to the first volume of the 1915 series he noted that it "often made very sad reading".[11] He sought to explain the severe loss of life and meagre results in terms of political and economic failure as much as military errors. Without any tradition of a mass army and with an economy that was slow to fulfil the requirements of even the tiny pre-war British Expeditionary Force, Britain was ill-prepared for war on a continental scale.[12] Edmonds argued that as a result "Too many of our bravest and best perished, seeking to compensate by valour

6 Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p.53.
7 Lloyd, 'Haig's Command of First Army', p.1053.
8 For recent work on the topic, see Robin Prior, *Gallipoli: The End of the Myth* (London, Yale University Press 2010) and Eric J. Erickson, *Gallipoli: The Ottoman Campaign* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2015).
9 David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, Vol.1, (London, Odhams Press, 1938) p.292.
10 Nick Lloyd, *Loos 1915* (Stroud, Tempus, 2006), p.218.
11 James Edmonds (ed.) *Military Operations, France and Belgium 1915,* Vol.1, (London, Macmillan and Co., 1927), p.vi (Hereafter *Official History*).
12 Edmonds felt strongly on this issue and revisited the theme in his article 'Mr Lloyd George and the Shell Shortage in 1914-1915' in *Army, Navy and Air Force Gazette,* June

for lack of experience and shortage of munitions".[13] The unremittingly bleak tone of both volumes of the 1915 *Official History* caused concern at the War Office, who sought to moderate some of the language. Edmonds flatly refused.[14] However, the nature of the *Official History* imposed its own form of moderation. Edmonds's work was intended to offer an interesting historical record for the public, whilst simultaneously providing an analytical commentary that would be useful to the military. This, combined with the fact that many of the key officers were still alive at time of publication, required Edmonds to walk a fine line. Therefore, much of the direct criticism of commanders contained in the work is veiled and requires reading 'between the lines.'[15] Nevertheless, although often subtly phrased, the overall tone of the *Official History* is decidedly critical.

In stark contrast, there was nothing subtle about David Lloyd George's analysis of 1915 as found in his *War Memoirs*. He laid the blame squarely at the feet of British High Command, dismissing their offensives as "futile … criminal attacks" that wasted precious resources that could have been better employed at Gallipoli, Salonika or in defence of Serbia.[16] Whereas Edmonds saw British failures in 1915 as stemming from a combination of military, political and economic mistakes, Lloyd George viewed the problem as lying with an obstinate officer class which lacked the skills and imagination to wage modern war.

The tragedy was amplified by the fact that Britain's wartime volunteers possessed tremendous potential. Novelist C.S. Forester referred to the enthusiastic new recruits as "the first flower of England".[17] Drawn from all walks of life, they were of a far higher physical and educational standard than the type of man who had been attracted to the pre-war military.[18] The waste of these fine recruits in fruitless battles became the motif of Alan Clark's *The Donkeys*, an influential and notorious study of British High Command in 1915 which popularised the phrase "lions led by donkeys" and became the foundation of much critical historiography.[19] Although academically dubious, Clark's contrast between an ignorant officer class and the courageous, stoic common soldier struck a powerful chord that still resonates in many popular interpretations of the war.[20]

1933. On this point, See Andrew Green, *Writing the Great War: Sir James Edmonds and the Official Histories 1915–1948* (London, Frank Cass, 2003), p.51.

13 Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.1, p.vii.

14 Green, *Writing the Great War,* p.18.

15 Ibid., pp.51-54.

16 Lloyd George, *Memoirs*, p.289, 291.

17 C.S. Forester, *The General* (London, William Collins, 2013 reprint), p.108.

18 M.A. Ramsay, *Command and Cohesion: The Citizen Soldier and Minor Tactics in the British Army, 1870-1918* (London, Praeger, 2003), pp.161-170.

19 Alan Clark, *The Donkeys* (London, Mayflower Books, 1967); John Laffin, *British Butchers and Bunglers of World War One* (Gloucester, A. Sutton, 1988); Denis Winter, *Haig's Command: A Reassessment* (London, Viking, 1991).

20 For example, Lyn MacDonald, *1915: The Death of Innocence* (New York, H. Holt, 1995).

The controversy over British commanders has been the subject of enormous historical debate. Historians have generally viewed 1915 through the prism of command performance and modern studies have done much to displace Clarke's simplistic portrayal of the BEF. The work of Tim Travers, Simon Robbins, Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson has created a critical yet nuanced picture of an inexperienced British officer class grappling with the difficulties of trench warfare.[21] Perhaps the most significant command development in this period was the fall of Sir John French and his replacement by his former protégé, Sir Douglas Haig, who would lead the BEF for the remainder of the conflict.[22] The year would prove a formative experience for Haig, and his abilities, weaknesses and learning process in this period have been a source of considerable and contrasting debate.[23] Yet, although historians have moderated much of the vitriolic criticism of British High Command, there is no disguising the fact that 1915 was a dreadful year for the British Army. As Gary Sheffield commented in his famous revisionist study *Forgotten Victory*: "If any year in the Great War comes close to fulfilling the stereotype promoted by *Oh! What a Lovely War*, it is 1915."[24]

However, as Edmonds noted: "Its very misfortunes and mistakes make 1915 particularly worthy of study. In remembrance of the final victory, we are apt to forget the painful and weary stages by which it was reached, and the heavy cost in our best lives during these stages."[25] It is the purpose of this collection to expand upon the sparse historiography of the British Army on the Western Front in 1915.[26] This book features fifteen thematic chapters that explore the problems faced by the BEF and its performance in battle. My own chapter paints a broad picture of the British Army in 1915 with a focus on its composition, equipment and experience. John Sneddon provides a thorough examination of the challenges facing British industry, Peter Hart considers the emergence of the Royal Flying Corps as an essential wing of the BEF,

21 Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front, and the Emergence of Modern Warfare 1900–1918* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1987); Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-1918: Defeat into Victory* (London, Frank Cass, 2005); Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson, 1914–1918* (Barnsley, Leo Cooper, 2004).

22 For Sir John French, see Richard Holmes, *The Little Field-Marshal: Sir John French* (London, J. Cape, 1981).

23 For recent work and contrasting work on Haig, see J.P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Gary Sheffield, *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army* (London, Aurum, 2011).

24 Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War, Myths and Realities* (London, Headline, 2001), p.133.

25 Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.1, p.vi.

26 For excellent general studies of the distinct elements of the British Army of 1915 see George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front: India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014); K.W. Mitchinson, *The Territorial Force at War 1914-1916* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Kenneth Radley, *Get Tough Stay Tough: Shaping the Canadian Corps 1914-1918* (Solihull, Helion & Co., 2014).

Graham Winton studies the experience of the forgotten Indian Cavalry, and John Spencer explores the effects of the fractious relationship between Sir John French, Lord Kitchener and Sir William Robertson. The nature and effectiveness of command is a theme that runs throughout the book. Simon Robbins explains the difficulties faced by Henry Horne during his tenure as commander of 2nd Division and Kenneth Radley casts light upon the baptism of fire undergone by the officers of 1st (Canadian) Division at the Second Battle of Ypres. The battle studies by Patrick Watt on Neuve Chapelle, Robert Williams on Festubert, Brian Curragh on Loos and Michael Woods on the Hohenzollern Redoubt all feature command as a central theme. The experience of the front line soldier is also considered. Tom Williams explores the performance of the 5th King's Own Lancaster Regiment at Second Ypres, Adrian Gregson gives a detailed account of the 1/7th King's Liverpool Regiment at Festubert, and Michael LoCicero examines combat at brigade, battalion and company level in his chapter on the forgotten battle for International Trench.

Taken as a whole these studies offer a new and balanced consideration of the British Army of 1915. Two common themes emerge. The first is the tremendous problems created by the sudden improvisation of an army of unprecedented proportions.[27] Napoleon's dictum "When a nation is without establishments and a military system, it is very difficult to organize an army" remained true; the sentiments were shared by Lord Kitchener, who reportedly raged in 1914: "Did they remember, when they went headlong into a war like this, that they were without an army, and without any preparation to equip one?"[28] Without a base of experience upon which to build, the BEF was forced to learn in the field and paid for its lessons in blood. The second theme is the uneven nature of the British Army's operational and tactical development.[29] There is a temptation, born of hindsight, to assume that because the Allies won the war the learning process must have been smooth and continuous. This was not the case in 1915. Some lessons were learned, but others were misinterpreted, forgotten or simply ignored. Commanders struggled to understand the battlefield problems of the war, and were forced to solve them with an army that was lacking in both equipment and training. Poor generalship greatly compounded these difficulties, but even skilful commanders found that their plans could be undone by the limitations of their own forces and the effectiveness of the German defences. There were no easy solutions to these intractable problems.

27 On this point, see Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914–1916* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2014).

28 Napoleon Bonaparte, (trans. Colone D'Aguilar), *Napoleon's Military Maxims*, (London, Freemantle & Co., 1901), p.20; Kitchener quoted in Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*, p.114.

29 This process is often referred to as the "learning curve", but in recent years the concept has been criticised for being overly simplistic. See William Philpott, 'Beyond the 'Learning Curve': The British Army's Military Transformation in the First World War, *RUSI Analysis*, 10 November 2009, available at: https://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref:C4AF97CF94AC8B/#.VtfUvpOirAQ.

Writing with the benefit of hindsight it is tempting to dismiss the BEF's Western Front offensives as puny in scale and doomed to failure from the outset. This is misleading. Although comparatively small, they represented the largest operations that the British Army was capable of mounting at the time and provided important milestones in the development of the novice force. Furthermore, battles such as Neuve Chapelle, Festubert and Loos each had moments where the BEF came close to achieving a significant victory. Yet, although the terms of the debate have moved on from the viewpoint presented in *The Donkeys*, the manner in which these battles were conducted and the performance of the commanders involved remains open to much criticism. As the chapters in this book reveal, a combination of inexperience, inadequate equipment, command errors and the friction of war all contributed to defeat, disappointment and severe casualties. For the British Army, 1915 would be a year of courage without glory.

1

"To make war as we must, and not as we should like": The British Army and the Problem of the Western Front, 1915

Spencer Jones

Any study of the British Army on the Western Front in 1915 makes for bleak reading. Thrust into a style of warfare for which it was conceptually and materially ill-prepared, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) endured a year of difficulties, defeats and bloodshed. To understand the experience of the BEF it is necessary to take a broad view of the problems which the army faced in the first full year of the war. In particular, criticism of senior officers of the BEF must take into account the context in which they found themselves. This chapter will examine the strategic situation, the nature of the army itself and the difficulties of identifying an effective operational approach, revealing how there were no easy solutions to the problem of the Western Front.

At the beginning of 1915, Lord Kitchener offered a grim assessment of the strategic situation on the continent:

> I suppose we must now recognise that the French Army cannot make a sufficient break through the German lines of defence to cause a complete change of the situation and bring about the retreat of German forces from northern Belgium. If that is so, then German lines in France may be looked upon as a fortress that cannot be carried by assault and also cannot be completely invested.[1]

His colleagues in the British cabinet shared similar views. Prime Minister Herbert Asquith recorded "I am profoundly dissatisfied with the immediate prospect – an enormous waste of life and money with no appreciable progress."[2] Chancellor of the

1 The National Archives (Hereafter TNA), PRO 30/57/50, Kitchener Papers, Lord Kitchener to Sir John French, 2 Jan, 1915.

2 M.G Brock and Eleanor Brock (eds.) *H.H. Asquith*: *Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982), p.346.

Exchequer David Lloyd George visited the Western Front in late 1914, and the experience had convinced him that "any attempt to force the carefully prepared German lines in the west would end in failure and appalling loss of life".[3]

The other consideration looming in the minds of policy makers was the relative weakness of the British military. Britain's strongest asset, the Royal Navy, could do little to influence the situation on the Western Front. This threw the burden onto the army. Although it had fought admirably in the opening months of the war, the small, highly trained British Expeditionary Force (BEF) had been effectively destroyed by the end of 1914. Reinforcement drafts slowly brought the divisions in France back up to strength but could not replace the loss of highly trained soldiers and veteran officers. Meanwhile, at home the British Army was in the midst of the largest expansion in its history, a complex and confusing process that was hampered by inexperience, ineptitude and inadequate resources.[4] With no tradition of a mass army, Britain would need time to forge its manpower into an effective fighting force. The process would take months, if not years. Kitchener did not believe that Britain's full military strength would be deployed in Europe before 1917.[5]

The combination of a seemingly impenetrable Western Front and distinctly limited military capability loomed large in British strategic thinking in 1915. With little appetite for a major European commitment, the War Council sought alternative options. This manifested itself in a two-fold strategy. Britain would supply its continental allies in Europe with money and munitions which, in combination with French and Russian manpower, would grind Germany into submission.[6] Meanwhile, Britain herself would carry out operations in peripheral theatres where the strength of the Royal Navy could be brought to bear.[7]

But this policy asked a great deal of Britain's allies. France had suffered horrendous casualties resisting the German invasion of 1914 and, although the enemy had been stopped short of Paris, German forces still occupied large swathes of her territory. The presence of the invader was intolerable to the French. General Joseph Joffre commented:

> The best and largest portion of the German army was on our soil, with its line of battle jutting out a mere five days' march from the heart of France. The situation

3 David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, Vol.1, (London, Odhams Press, 1938), p.220.
4 On this point, see Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914–1916* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2014).
5 Ibid., p.38.
6 TNA: CAB 42/1/10, A Comparison of Belligerent Forces, War Office, 6 January 1915.
7 David French, *British Strategy and War Aims, 1914-1916* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1986), p.68.

A French postcard celebrating the alliance between Britain and France. The pressing need to support French offensives constrained the British Army's freedom of action in 1915. (Editor's collection)

made it clear to every Frenchman that our task consisted in defeating this enemy, and driving him out of our country.[8]

France was committed to major, sustained offensives on the Western Front and expected Britain to do more than simply provide financial credit. At the very least Joffre wanted British forces to take a larger share of holding the line, thereby freeing up French divisions for action. More significantly, Joffre also appealed for the British to mount attacks of their own in support of the larger French operations.[9] As 1915 dragged on and French casualties mounted, these appeals would become ever more strident.

Whilst the French fought to expel the Germans from their territory, the Russians struggled to stem the tide of a German and Austro-Hungarian invasion. Ominous news of Russian disasters and retreats were cause for concern in London and Paris.

8 J. Joffre, (trans. T. Bentley Mott) *The Memoirs of Marshal Joffre,* Vol.2, (London, Geoffrey Bles, 1932), p.327.

9 For further discussion of French operations in 1915, see Jonathan Krause, *Early Trench Tactics in the French Army: The Second Battle of Artois, May-June 1915* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2013) and Jonathan Krause, 'Only Inaction is Disgraceful': French Operations Under Joffre, 1914-1916' in Jonathan Krause (ed.) *The Greater War: Other Combatants and Other Fronts, 1914-1918* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

The litany of defeats suffered by Russia raised fears that she might be forced out of the war. Britain had reliable intelligence that Germany was seeking to conclude a separate peace with Russia and thereby detach her from the alliance.[10] Therefore, the frequent Russian appeals for military assistance from Britain and France were treated with the utmost gravity.[11] In a long war the presence of Russia's tremendous reserves of manpower would be a vital asset and she could not be allowed to fall. As Field Marshal Sir John French noted, at the beginning of 1915, Russia "was our great hope and mainstay for the future."[12]

The requirements to support her allies coloured British strategy in 1915. Lord Esher summed up the problem in a letter to Kitchener:

> But with regard to France, it would be comparatively simple to establish ties of intimacy. This is an essential condition to carrying on a war with a highly organised and concentrated military power such as Germany. We cannot afford to procrastinate and muddle along, owing to the enormous strain upon France, a strain which is not felt to the same extent in this country, and owing to the psychology of Russia, an Empire that before now, under Alexander a hundred years ago, and in the Crimea sixty years ago, and the other day in Manchuria, suddenly and for no obvious reason, collapsed.[13]

British politicians were fully aware of the need to cooperate with their allies but had to balance this requirement against the fragility of their military assets. The result was a strategic paradox. To support France and Russia it was necessary to strike blows against Germany, but the only place this could be done was on the Western Front, where Britain lacked the strength to achieve significant results.

In the first half of 1915 the War Council sought to escape this paradox by approving the Dardanelles campaign against Germany's ally, the Ottoman Empire.[14] Yet the problem of the Western Front remained. Although a decisive victory over the Ottomans would provide access to the Black Sea and reopen supply lines to Russia, defeating the Turks would not address the fundamental problem of fighting Germany. Caught on the horns of this dilemma, the British War Council was slowly, but surely, forced to place ever greater emphasis on the Western Front.

Unfortunately, the hesitant nature of the commitment resulted in a dangerous disconnect between the War Council, who decided strategy, and the commander of

10 French, *British Strategy*, p.62.
11 See Krause, 'Inaction is Disgraceful', p.31, for its influence on French operations.
12 John French, *1914*, (London, Constable), p.346.
13 O. Esher (ed.), *Journals and Letters of Reginald Viscount Esher,* Vol.3 (London, Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1938), p.200.
14 For further details, see Robin Prior, *Gallipoli: The End of the Myth* (London, Yale University Press, 2010) and Eric J. Erickson, *Gallipoli: The Ottoman Campaign* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2010).

the British Expeditionary Force in France, Sir John French, who directed operations in the field.[15] There was no clear strategic direction for French or his army for much of 1915. This was reflective of deeper problems. At the outbreak of hostilities Kitchener had provided Sir John with instructions that urged cooperation with the French whilst simultaneously stressing the BEF's independent role and the importance of avoiding heavy casualties.[16] This required a delicate military balancing act that proved impossible during the intense fighting that characterised the first months of the war. As a result, relations between Sir John and Kitchener soured to such a point that, in November 1914, Kitchener had suggested to Joffre that French be replaced by Sir Ian Hamilton. Joffre declined the offer, but the fact that it had been made at all appalled Sir John.

There was no sign that the balancing act would be any easier in 1915 than it had been in the previous year. In many ways it was considerably harder. Sir John had lost the confidence of Kitchener, but Joffre's support had left him with a certain sense of obligation to the French commander that made requests for cooperation difficult to decline.[17] The personal nature of these requests was important. Anglo-French strategic cooperation remained remarkably informal and attempts to forge a firmer policy at the Calais-Chantilly Conference in July 1915 only resulted in vague agreements. However, the weakness of the BEF and the War Council's disinclination to fight on the Western Front seriously limited the help that the British could offer their allies. As James Edmonds commented in the *Official History:*

> … the BEF was not in a condition to make the effort that our French Allies expected of the British Empire in a life or death struggle. Yet the opportunity for an offensive to expel the invaders from France and Belgium afforded by the absence of so many German divisions in Russia might never re-occur.[18]

The failure of the War Council to provide clear strategic direction added to the commander-in-chief's woes. Kitchener envisaged the BEF undertaking local operations to sap German manpower, or preferably staying on the defensive and repelling

15 Sir John's position and the limits of his authority are a complex topic. See Stephen Badsey, 'Sir John French and Command of the BEF' in Spencer Jones (ed.) *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914* (Solihull, Helion & Co., 2013), pp.40-42.

16 Kitchener's instructions to French are reproduced in James Edmonds (ed.) *Military Operations, France and Belgium 1914,* Vol.1, (London, Macmillan and Co., 1922), p.499. (Hereafter *Official History*).

17 Richard Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal: A Life of Sir John French* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1981), pp.270-271.

18 Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.2, p.79.

German attacks with heavy losses.[19] He was disinclined to support anything larger. In March, Kitchener explained the situation to Sir John:

> He told me that he considered Joffre and I were 'on our trial' – that if we showed within the next month or 5 weeks that we really could make 'substantial advances' and 'break the German Line' he would – so far as he was concerned – always back us up with all the troops he could send. But if we failed it would be essential that the government should look for some other theatre of operations … I told him that I thought he had put the matter very fairly and I was content to accept what he said.[20]

These related factors left Sir John with a paradox of his own. If the BEF did not launch a successful attack, then its already meagre resources would be further reduced by transfer to another theatre. Yet to ensure the "substantial advance" demanded by Kitchener, Sir John's army required more men and especially more artillery ammunition – but these would only be provided if the BEF could prove its ability to break the German line in the first place.

Passive inaction was anathema to Sir John, and, when combined with the pressure to support his French allies, made it all but certain that he would commit the BEF to the offensive. Post-war critics, writing with the benefit of many decades of hindsight, have frequently condemned this decision.[21] This criticism is unfair. The situation in 1915 was unprecedented and decision making was shaped by inexperience and uncertainty over the resilience of Britain's allies. British policy makers and commanders were confronted by problems on a scale previously unimagined. If a fault can be found it is that the lack of a clear strategic direction on the Western Front translated itself into a muddled operational approach. As a result the BEF fought battles that did not always suit its capabilities, resources or objectives.[22]

The BEF's battlefield difficulties were exacerbated by the inexperience of its senior officers. Pre-war training had done little to prepare commanders for the responsibility of handling large forces.[23] This had resulted in problems in the early part of the conflict which were compounded as the army expanded in 1915. From deployment in August 1914 to the Battle of Neuve Chapelle in March 1915, the BEF grew from two infantry

19 French, *British Strategy*, pp.392-3.
20 Imperial War Museum (Hereafter IWM), French Papers, Diary, 31 March 1915.
21 For the most famous example of this school of thought, see Alan Clark, *The Donkeys* (New York, Morrow, 1962).
22 The most famous of these is the Battle of Loos, termed "the unwanted battle" by Basil Liddell Hart. See Basil Liddell Hart, *The Real War 1914-1918* (London, Faber & Faber, 1930), p.175; Gordon Corrigan *Loos 1915: The Unwanted Battle* (Stroud, Spellmount, 2006) and Nick Lloyd, *Loos 1915* (Stroud, Tempus, 2006).
23 Jones (ed.) *Stemming the Tide*, pp.20-23.

corps and a cavalry division to six infantry corps and two cavalry corps.[24] This expansion resulted in accelerated promotion for those lucky enough to survive the brutal opening of the war. Officers who began the struggle commanding battalions now commanded brigades, brigadiers now directed divisions, and divisional commanders controlled corps. The original corps commanders of August 1914, Sir Douglas Haig and Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, now led First and Second Army respectively. This level of command had not been considered in peacetime and was a wartime expediency. Its novelty meant that for the first part of 1915 it was not entirely clear how it was meant to function.[25]

The promotions required to fill senior posts exposed some of the tensions within the British Army's hierarchy. John French hated Smith-Dorrien, with whom he had feuded before the war, and continuously interfered with the work of Second Army until finally forcing Smith-Dorrien to resign in May.[26] Conversely, Sir John allowed his protégé, Haig, an almost free reign at First Army, resulting in a series of offensives that took place with very little influence from GHQ.[27] The situation was worsened by Sir John's notoriously mercurial temperament. As Official Historian Sir James Edmonds noted, French frequently "… passed from optimism to pessimism. It was naturally most difficult for his subordinates to follow his moods, particularly when his mind was on the border line between one phase of thought and the next."[28] This uncertainty from the commander-in-chief was deeply unhelpful for an army that was in the midst of a command revolution. Rapid promotions, new formations, and the challenges of trench warfare put the senior command of the BEF under intense pressure and necessitated a slow, often painful, learning process.[29]

The growth of the army required a concurrent expansion of administration, logistics and staff work. This exposed a grave shortage of officers trained in these essential duties. The pre-war pool had been small and a high proportion of officers with the distinction of 'psc' – "passed Staff College" – became casualties in the opening months of the struggle. Replacements were hard to find. The Staff College had closed at the start of the war as mobilisation required most of its teaching staff to assume separate roles with the BEF. No plans existed for maintaining the function of the college in

24 Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.1, pp.366-368.
25 Ian Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front 1914-1919*, (Westport, Praeger, 1998) p.77.
26 For details of the pre-war feud, see Spencer Jones & Steven J. Corvi 'A Commander of Rare and Unusual Coolness: General Sir Horace Lockwood Smith-Dorrien', in Jones (ed.), *Stemming the Tide*, pp.157-158. On their strained relationship in 1915, see C.R. Ballard, *Smith-Dorrien* (London, Constable & Co., 1931), pp.296-313.
27 Nick Lloyd, "With Faith and Without Fear": Sir Douglas Haig's Command of First Army during 1915' in *The Journal of Military History,* Vol.71, No.4, 2007, pp.1051-1076; Lloyd, *Loos*, p.65.
28 Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.1, p.299.
29 Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-18: Defeat into Victory* (London, Frank Cass, 2005), pp.18-34.

wartime. Within a matter of weeks, instructors, staff and students had departed for France and the college itself was used as accommodation for New Army officers.[30] As a result, commanders in France were required to employ untrained regimental officers. This was not ideal. As one War Office employee commented: "… it could scarcely be expected that a captain of a regiment of the line wounded in the retreat from Mons would excel in an attempt to allocate freight to a ship."[31] Staff work was technical and required skills that had to be developed over time. Yet time was a resource which the BEF, facing urgent demands to assist French offensives, did not possess. Instead, hasty and improvised training took place, with new staff officers attached to headquarters as "learners" or sent to a variety of ad hoc schools behind the lines.[32] Frederick Maude, commanding 14th Brigade in April 1915, offered a comment that reflected a depressingly common experience for the BEF:

> No Divisional Orders at all sent out and we had to get on as best we could without. Staff work pitiable and it was only after my orders had gone to the troops that a variety of messages began to arrive which were in direct opposition to those I had arranged.[33]

The BEF was not merely expanding. It was also regenerating. 1914 had torn the heart from the pre-war British Army. The loss of experienced junior officers was acute; a quarter of the army's pre-war officer class were listed as killed, wounded or missing by 30 November 1914.[34] Units stationed in imperial garrisons were able to supply some replacements and the Special Reserve provided others, but the scale of casualties necessitated the employment of retired officers, termed "dug outs", to fill the gap. These latter men varied in quality and, although not lacking in courage, approximately half of their number proved unfit for wartime command.[35] Staff officer W.N. Nicholson dismissed them as "ghosts of the past inserted by the War Office to fill a blank cubby hole."[36] The "dugouts" were joined by volunteers who were given commis-

30 Brian Bond, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College 1854–1914* (London, Eyre Methuen, 1972), p.303.
31 Quoted in Dan Todman, 'The Grand Lamasery revisited: General Headquarters on the Western Front, 1914–1918' in Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman (eds.), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience 1914–1918* (Stroud, Spellmount, 2004), p.49.
32 Bond, *Staff College,* p.304.
33 Andrew Syk, (ed.) *The Military Papers of Lieutenant-General Frederick Stanley Maude, 1914–1917* (Stroud, Army Records Society, 2012), p.73.
34 Peter Hodgkinson, 'The Infantry Battalion Commanding Officers of the BEF' in Jones (ed.) *Stemming the Tide*, p.305.
35 Peter E. Hodgkinson, *British Infantry Battalion Commanders in the First World War* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2015), p.46.
36 W.N. Nicholson, *Behind the Lines: An Account of the Administrative Staffwork in the British Army 1914–1918* (Stevenage: Tom Donovan, 1989), p.12.

sions for the duration of the war and became "temporary gentlemen". Whilst fit and enthusiastic, the majority of these men had no military background whatsoever. Their training varied considerably. With experienced officers at a premium there was little ability to disseminate knowledge to these new recruits. Although his sensationalised memoir is not always reliable, Robert Graves's recollections of training as a second lieutenant with the Royal Welch Fusiliers have a ring of truth:

> … we second-lieutenants learned regimental history, drill, musketry, Boer War field-tactics, military law and organization, how to recognize bugle calls, how to work a machine-gun, and how to conduct ourselves on formal occasions. We dug no trenches, handled no bombs, thought of the company, not of the platoon, still less of the section, as the smallest independent tactical unit. Only two wounded officers were back from the front at the time; both had left the Second Battalion on the retreat from Mons. Neither would talk much of his experiences.[37]

Just like the senior commanders and staff officers, regimental officers had a great deal to learn about the realities of the Western Front. The time pressure that affected the higher reaches of the BEF was felt as keenly at lower level. For example, at the opening of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, 10 March 1915, the average length of time that a battalion commander had spent in post was just 138 days, the lowest figure for any major British battle of the First World War.[38]

The dangerous combination of swiftly promoted commanders, hastily trained staff officers and inexperienced regimental officers lay at the heart of many of the BEF's battlefield problems in 1915. One battalion commander remarked "everyone [had] to learn, staffs and troops alike, when faced with conditions so new as those of 1915."[39] As a result, in the words of General Sir Noel Birch, the BEF had to "learn our lesson in the pitiless school of war."[40]

The army itself was in a period of unprecedented change. The composition of the BEF in 1915 reflected the pace of expansion. For much of the year the army in France consisted of a mixture of Regular, Indian, Territorial, New Army, and Canadian divisions. Training, equipment and outlook could vary considerably from one formation to the next.

The Regular infantry divisions formed the backbone of the BEF. New divisions were created by assembling Regular battalions drawn from imperial garrisons, allowing the original six infantry divisions to grow to a total of eleven by autumn 1915.[41] However,

37 Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London, Penguin, 2000) p.71.
38 Hodgkinson, *Infantry Battalion Commanders*, p.56.
39 Quoted in Robbins, *British Generalship*, p.19.
40 Quoted in ibid., p.18.
41 The 7th, 8th, 27th and 28th Divisions were sent to the Western Front. The 29th Division was deployed to Gallipoli. In August 1915, the final Regular division was created by assembling existing Guards battalions into a single Guards Division.

this figure gives a misleading impression of strength. The seven divisions which had fought at Ypres in 1914 had been reduced to virtual skeleton formations. For example, 7th Division had been "battered almost out of existence" and reduced to "a mere wreck of the fine force which had landed in Belgium".[42] It has been claimed that battalions that had landed in August in 1914 had barely "one officer and 30 men left" by the end of the year.[43] It proved impossible to replace these highly trained men. Fresh drafts arrived in France but they could not match the quality of the pre-war soldier. Sergeant John Lucy, a veteran of the Royal Irish Rifles, commented that the new men were "shiftless, half-baked in every way, and the non-commissioned officers were very poor stuff … the Old Army was finished."[44] James Edmonds offered similar sentiments, noting:

> The ranks of the old battalions bearing great names, had been filled with new drafts – half trained, only partially disciplined and new to battle. These had stood the test well as far as courage and fighting spirit went, but they naturally had neither the skill with the rifle nor the resource in battle of old soldiers.[45]

Whilst the original battalions struggled to absorb new drafts, the newly formed Regular divisions had problems of their own. The Regular battalions of 1915 were often of a different stamp to those of the previous year.[46] Many had spent years abroad in obscure garrisons and had not received the same training opportunities afforded to units stationed at home or in India, who, in Robert Graves's opinion, were "less old fashioned."[47] Captain Billy Congreve was highly critical of the new divisions:

> The 27th Division are but a poor show. When they first came into the line about fifty percent of them went sick straight off. Though now they have got a bit better, I do not think much of them and wish they were anywhere but on our left … The 28th Division has come in on the left of the 27th Division and is of about the same type – hurriedly put together Regular battalions, collected from all over the world, given staffs made up in the same way and thrown out here. A most rotten arrangement.[48]

42 Richard Hughes, 'Tommy Capper`s "Immortals" – How effective was the 7th Division at the First Battle of Ypres?', MA thesis, University of Birmingham, 2013; Edmonds, *Official History,* 1915, Vol. 2, p.385.
43 Beckett, *Ypres: The First Battle, 1914* (Harlow, Pearson, 2004) p.226.
44 John Lucy, *There's a Devil in the Drum* (London, Faber & Faber, 1938), p.293.
45 Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.1, p.325.
46 There were exceptions. For example, 2nd Scottish Rifles, stationed on Malta at the outbreak of the war, were a crack outfit. On this point, see John Baynes, *Morale*: *A Study of Men and Courage; The Second Scottish Rifles at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, 1915* (London, Leo Cooper, 1987).
47 Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p.151.
48 Terry Norman (ed.) *Armageddon Road: A VC's Diary 1914-1916* (London, W.Kimber, 1982), pp.100-101.

Nevertheless, the Regular divisions were regarded as the best in the army and would form the spearhead for the majority of British offensives in 1915. This accelerated their rate of wastage, for each battle cost them irreplaceable casualties amongst trained officers and men. Although they would retain the distinction of 'Regular' for the entire war, remorseless attrition meant that this title had lost its meaning by the end of 1915. A report issued after the Battle of Loos noted sadly "… it can no longer be assumed that measures which would as a matter of course have been taken in our Regular divisions in the earlier stages of the war, will now always be carried out efficiently."[49]

After the Regulars, the most experienced troops in the BEF were the divisions of the Indian Expeditionary Force (IEF). In 1915 the IEF consisted of the Meerut and Lahore infantry divisions, plus an Indian Cavalry Corps. Primarily composed of Indian soldiers commanded by white officers, it was organised and equipped along subtly different lines to the rest of the army. Each Indian infantry brigade consisted of three native and one white battalion. Composed of pre-war volunteers, Indian units had boasted high tactical standards, with a particular speciality in hill warfare suitable for the North West Frontier.[50] However, this specialism in "small wars" was not ideal preparation for intense combat in the fields and woods of Flanders in 1914. The IEF had fought hard at the First Battle of Ypres, but it had suffered heavy losses which could not be easily replaced.[51] Much like the Regular Army, it was a wasting asset, but the problems of casualty replacement were even greater due to the archaic system of recruitment that existed in India.[52]

The IEF and its commanders had something of a mixed reputation. A large part of this appears to be have been born of racial prejudice and pre-war cliques, with officers of the Home Army inclined look down upon officers of the Indian Army due to their lower social status. Nevertheless, Indian infantry divisions were employed as assault troops at Neuve Chapelle, Aubers Ridge, and Festubert, which suggests senior officers retained confidence in their fighting abilities. These battles would inflict further losses upon the pre-war strength of the IEF, and by July 1915 their commander, Sir James Willcocks, was complaining that his force "was not fit to resist a determined 'attack' much less take the offensive".[53] The IEF would recover in time for the Battle of Loos in September, but it would be withdrawn from the Western Front by the end of the year to provide reinforcements for the campaign in Mesopotamia.

The professionals of the Regular and Indian divisions were supported by the steady arrival of the Territorial Force (TF). In 1914, individual Territorial battalions had

49 Quoted in Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.2, p.vii.
50 George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front: India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp.53-114.
51 Ibid., pp.134-148.
52 Ibid., pp.159-168.
53 Quoted in ibid., p.268.

been sent to Flanders to assist the beleaguered BEF. The process continued in 1915, but the force was also able to deploy several full divisions. The experience and battlefield performance of Territorial soldiers is considered in greater detail elsewhere in this volume but some general points can be made here. The Territorial force had difficulty shifting onto a war footing in 1914. At the outbreak of war, Kitchener's ambivalent attitude towards the Territorial Force combined with the inefficiency of certain Territorial Associations created procurement problems.[54] The Territorials were forced to compete against the demands of both the Regulars and the New Army for officers, men and equipment, adding to the confusion that accompanied British mobilisation throughout 1914-15.

The quality of Territorial units varied considerably.[55] Much depended on their pre-war organisation and recruiting profile. Some battalions were of a comparable standard to the Regulars. At the Battle of Aubers Ridge, 9 May 1915, the 1/13th London (Kensingtons) became the first Territorial unit to be employed in an opening assault, and were the only battalion that broke through the German line.[56] Other units were less efficient, and the decision to deploy individual battalions to Regular brigades was informed in part by a desire alleviate their inexperience. For example, one man of the 4th Seaforth Highlanders despaired of the quality of his unit and commented that it would take "about ten years to get us licked into proper fighting troops."[57]

Much like the rest of the BEF, inexperience amongst officers was the greatest barrier to Territorial effectiveness. The TF encountered all the problems that afflicted the army as a whole and was further disadvantaged by the fact that its pre-war officer class was considerably less efficient than that of the Regulars.[58] There were earnest efforts to overcome this inexperience, such as the aforementioned system of attaching battalions to Regular formations and a proliferation of brigade and divisional schools that offered crash courses in wartime command. But such methods needed time to bear fruit, and time was something which the BEF did not possess.[59]

Despite the problems described above, the Territorials undoubtedly represented a valuable asset to the BEF and were considered to be of a higher standard than wartime volunteers in the New Armies.[60] However, just like the Regular Army, the TF was subject to irreplaceable attrition. Edmonds considered that by mid-1915:

> The Territorials fought more than well, but unfortunately with ever decreasing numbers; for, as a result of the intensive recruiting for the New Armies, and

54 Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, pp.272-273.
55 K.W. Mitchinson, *The Territorial Force at War 1914-1916* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) pp.60-63.
56 Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.2, p.35.
57 Quoted in Mitchinson, *Territorial Force,* p.61.
58 Hodgkinson, 'Commanders of the BEF', p.312.
59 Mitchinson, *Territorial Force,* p.85.
60 Ibid., p.10.

A French patriotic postcard portraying the soldiers of the British Empire. In 1915 the British Army on the Western Front consisted of a mixture of British Regulars, Territorials and New Army units, as well as divisions drawn from India and Canada. (Editor's collection)

the failure to foresee that the Territorial Army might be employed overseas and suffer serious wastage, few Territorial reinforcements were forthcoming.[61]

Beyond the Territorials, Britain's only source of manpower lay with the wartime volunteers who were formed into the New Armies. The raising of these divisions has been the subject of much study.[62] Kitchener was reluctant to deploy New Army divisions to France, harbouring concerns about their military efficiency and fearful that they would be destroyed in fruitless assaults against German defences.[63] However, the demands of alliance politics and the stalemate at Gallipoli forced his hand. The first New Army formation, 9th (Scottish) Division,[64] arrived in France in May 1915 and by the end of the year the bulk of the BEF would consist of these newly raised divisions. Their creation and training had been characterised by improvisation and disorganisation, and their military efficiency was an unknown quantity.[65] Although unified

61 Edmonds, *Official History 1915,* Vol.2., p.325.
62 Simkins, *Kitchener's Army* remains the standard text for this subject.
63 French, *British Strategy*, p.88, 100.
64 See Brian Curragh's chapter elsewhere in this volume for a study of 7th Division and 9th Division in action at the Battle of Loos.
65 Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.2, p.293.

by a strong *espirit de corps*, they were extremely green, and needed time to adapt to the brutal business of trench warfare. Premature commitment could be disastrous, as revealed by the sad fate of 21st and 24th Division at the Battle of Loos.[66]

The men of the Canadian divisions provided the fourth, and smallest, component of the BEF. The experience of Canadian forces is examined in depth elsewhere in this volume and reveals many of the harsh realities the force faced during in its baptism of fire in 1915. Ultimately, both New Army and Canadian divisions would prove their worth in battle, but the achievements of 1917–1918 lay a long way in the future. In 1915, these formations had a great deal to learn.

Aside from inexperience, the British Army was characterised by its relative lack of equipment. Artillery was to become the dominant arm on the Western Front, but the BEF was seriously out gunned. Pre-war stocks of guns and ammunition had been exhausted within the opening months of the war and delays in British manufacturing meant that supplies were precarious throughout 1915.[67]

From the very first, it proved impossible to equip newly raised divisions with adequate artillery. 7th Division's heavy battery was composed of old 4.7-inch guns instead of modern 60-pounders, and this trend would be continued with the Territorial and New Army divisions. The 4.7-inch gun had been an improvised weapon introduced during the Boer War (1899–1902) and had emerged from the conflict with a decidedly mixed reputation.[68] By the time of the First World War many of the guns were worn to such a point that they were dangerously inaccurate. Edmonds recorded that they were nicknamed "strict neutrality" due to their tendency to shell friend and foe alike.[69] Yet, the 4.7-inch was the only heavy field gun readily available to the army in 1915 and was employed through sheer necessity.[70]

Territorial divisions were forced to rely entirely on artillery of Boer War vintage. 47th (London) Division's field batteries were equipped with 15-pounders, weapons that had been considered obsolete following the conflict in South Africa due to their limited range and slow rate of fire. The division was supplemented by dated 5-inch howitzers from the same war and its heavy branch was armed with the maligned 4.7-inch gun.[71] Armament for the New Army divisions varied; the 9th (Scottish)

66 Lloyd, *Loos*, p.163.
67 See John Mason Sneddon's chapter elsewhere in this volume for a study of the problems in British industry in 1915.
68 Spencer Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army 1902–1914* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), pp.121-122.
69 Edmonds, *Official History 1914*, Vol.2, p.164.
70 At the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, First Army deployed twelve 60-pounders compared to thirty two 4.7-inch guns. See Martin Farndale, *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery: Western Front 1914-18* (Woolwich, Royal Artillery Institution, 1986), p.88.
71 Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.2, p.6.

Division was equipped with modern 18-pounders and 4.5-inch howitzers, but the 15th (Scottish) Division fought the Battle of Loos with 15-pounder field guns.[72]

Furthermore all British artillery, modern or obsolete, was hampered by the chronic shortage of ammunition. Britain's industry could not keep up with the army's relentless demand for shells, and the situation was exacerbated by the need to supply forces on both the Western Front and at Gallipoli. At the Battle of Aubers Ridge the number of rounds per gun was dangerously low, and by the end of the Battle of Festubert the gunners had been reduced to virtual impotence for want of ammunition.[73]

Over the course of the year, new heavier weapons slowly arrived at the front, but the supply was never more than a trickle and every gun was constrained by the ammunition shortage. Billy Congreve commented on the deployment of a monstrous 15-inch siege howitzer in February 1915: "… it ought to astonish the Boche, but we only have about one round of ammunition *per diem* and two on Sunday!!"[74]

Lack of artillery firepower hampered British operations throughout the year. The strength of the pre-battle bombardment could mean the difference between success and failure on the Western Front. In early 1915 the gunners had carried out a variety of experiments to determine the weight of fire required to cut through barbed wire and smash the German parapets.[75] At the Battle of Neuve Chapelle in March a hurricane bombardment of 35 minutes had been employed with considerable success, but as German defences improved, ever heavier artillery fire was needed to crush them. Major-General Richard Haking had identified the problem in April 1915:

> There is however, one important point which limits the action of the Army as a whole, when the enemy's line is first being assaulted, and that is the artillery preparation. Infantry cannot be thrown against strong entrenchments, or breastworks, heavily wired in front, until something has been done to demoralise the enemy's troops behind his parapets, and break down the obstacles in front of him. It is necessary therefore to commence our operations with a very heavy bombardment in order to secure this advantage. It has been found by experiment that it requires a great number of guns, and a great deal of ammunition both to demoralise the defenders, and still more to destroy his wire entanglements.[76]

72 Farndale, *Royal Regiment of Artillery*, p.119.
73 Simon Worrall, 'How did the failure at the Battle of Aubers Ridge impact upon the learning process of the British Expeditionary Force?', MA thesis, University of Birmingham, 2013, p.22; Farndale, *Royal Regiment of Artillery*, p.109.
74 Norman (ed.), *Armageddon Road*, p.105.
75 Edmonds, *Official History 1915,* Vol.1, p.78; Syk, (ed.) *Lieutenant-General Frederick Stanley Maude*, p.57.
76 TNA: WO 95/1228, 1st Division War Diary, 'Lecture on the Attack' by Major General R.C.B. Haking, April 1915.

This gave rise to a lethal battlefield competition, as the Germans sought to strengthen their positions and the British strove to bring ever greater artillery fire down upon them. Unfortunately for the BEF, inexperience amongst its gunners combined with lack of weapons and ammunition meant that its preparations frequently fell short. The deadly consequences of inadequate artillery bombardments were revealed at Aubers Ridge in May and at the Hohenzollern Redoubt in October.[77] James Edmonds offered a blunt summary:

> Half-trained troops should be supported by more than the usual allotment of artillery; yet even the normal pre-war number of field guns per division was lacking;[78] the heavy guns were wholly inadequate to their task, and many of the artillerymen were not so well instructed in their work as the infantry in theirs, their training having been worse handicapped by shortage of material and equipment.[79]

Whilst the gunners grappled with shortages of weapons and ammunition, the infantry had equipment problems of their own. The divisions of the BEF lacked a standard rifle in 1915. The Regular and Indian divisions employed the modern Short Magazine Lee-Enfield Mark III, but the majority of Territorial battalions went to France armed with the older "Long" Lee-Enfield.[80] This rifle had last seen action against the Boers and proved unwieldy in trench warfare due to its length. The Canadian divisions were armed with the notorious Ross rifle, a fragile weapon that immediately proved inadequate in the violent conditions of the Western Front.[81] The BEF would not be equipped with a standard pattern of rifle until mid-1916.

Standardisation was similarly lacking in the provision of grenades. The BEF's standard pre-war weapon was the "Hand Grenade No.1", a percussion device designed to explode on impact rather than a time-fused grenade. Although possessing a powerful blast effect,[82] it was expensive to manufacture and required a great deal of skill to use, or else it became "a weapon probably more dangerous to the thrower and his comrades than to the enemy."[83] Whatever the merits of the weapon it was in perennially short supply and was soon supplemented by a bewildering variety of new

77 See Michael Woods's chapter elsewhere in this volume for further details on the Battle for the Hohenzollern Redoubt.
78 New Army divisions possessed 64 guns rather than the 76 guns of the Regular divisions. This was due to the reorganisation of British artillery into four gun batteries. On this point, see Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, p.285.
79 Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.2, p.395.
80 Mitchinson, *Territorial Force*, p.97.
81 Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.2, p.76.
82 C.E. Montague, *Disenchantment* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1922), p.54. Montague noted that in comparison to inadequate French grenades of the era "ours would kill".
83 John Ewing, *The History of the 9th (Scottish) Division 1914-1919* (London, J.Murray, 1921), pp.13-14.

grenades, ranging from homemade "jam tin bombs" to official War Office patterns. Captain J.C. Dunn related a demonstration of a new type of grenade, "a tin canister said to contain an almost unbelievable number of shrapnel bullets", in March 1915:

> The corporal who was to throw the bomb over a heap of mangolds missed his aim and landed it into the heap on our side. "Lie down," shouted Murphy in his best voice, and we all complied, wondering how many of the innumerable shrapnel bullets would be lodged in our anatomies. The bomb exploded with a kind of metallic sneeze, and one mangold sailed majestically into the air.[84]

The BEF soon recognised the importance of the grenade. 7th Division's after action report for the Battle of Neuve Chapelle commented "The outstanding feature of these operations was the success of the hand grenade in trench fighting."[85] However, as with all other elements of British equipment, its employment was limited by supply shortages. It would not be until 1916 that the effective Mills bombs pattern was widely available. For 1915 the BEF was forced to make do with an uncertain supply of frequently unreliable grenades.[86]

The rifle and the grenade – of whatever type was available – formed the cornerstone of the infantryman's equipment throughout 1915. Other weapons that would become ubiquitous later in the war, such as telescopic sniper rifles, trench mortars and light machine guns slowly appeared over the course of the year, but never in sufficient numbers to have much influence upon the fighting.[87] One Lewis gun per infantry battalion was issued to six specially selected divisions in July 1915.[88] At the Battle of Loos, the 15th (Scottish) Division was well equipped with Lewis guns, deploying 12 per battalion, but this was in lieu of heavy machine guns as the supply of the latter had run out prior to deployment.[89] Indeed, for the army as a whole machine guns were in particularly short supply, an absence identified by Paddy Griffith as "a crucial difficulty, entirely comparable in importance with the shell shortage or the bomb shortage."[90]

It was against this background of expansion, inexperience and shortages that the British Army grappled with the intractable difficulties of breaching the defences of

84 J.C. Dunn, *The War the Infantry Knew 1914–1919* (London, Sphere Books, 1989), p.124.
85 TNA WO 95/1628, 7th Division War Diary, Narrative of Operations, Neuve Chapelle, March 10th to 14th, 1915.
86 Grenade design and procurement is studied in much greater detail in John Mason Sneddon's chapter elsewhere in this volume.
87 For the introduction of telescopic sniper rifles, see H. Hesketh-Pritchard, *Sniping in France* (Solihull, Helion & Co., 2004), p.7, 17.
88 Edmonds, *Official History 1915,* Vol.2, p.89.
89 Ibid., p.191.
90 Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack 1916–18* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994), p.122.

the Western Front. An immediate problem was the unfavourable ground which the BEF occupied. To the north, Second Army held the Ypres Salient, a notoriously active sector characterised by incessant trench warfare. The constricted nature of the Allied position within the salient gave the Germans the ability bring converging fire from front and flanks, and made it an unpromising location for major offensive action. To the south, First Army lay opposite the German positions astride Aubers Ridge. The ridge was barely seventy feet at its highest point and considerably lower for much of its length, but the surrounding terrain was so flat that even this miniscule height offered a decisive advantage in observation. Lieutenant-General Sir James Willcocks of the Indian Corps left an evocative description of the countryside in the British sector:

> A dismal dead plain, dotted with farm-houses and here and there clumps of trees. The uninteresting roads metalled only in the centre; ditches and drains in every direction; observation beyond a very limited distance impossible, and for months the morning mists enveloped everything in a thick haze well into mid-day; canals crossed here and there by bridges, added to the difficulties of communication … This monotonous land boasted no hills and valleys, not even a mound.[91]

The problem in both sectors was that the Germans occupied superior positions that overlooked British lines. Journalist Philip Gibbs described the problems after the war:

> Everywhere the enemy was on high ground and had observation of our position … In cheerful mood, on sunny days, German gunners with shells to spare ranged upon separate farm-houses and isolated barns until they became bits of oddly standing brick about great holes. They shelled the roads down which our transport wagons went at night, and the communication trenches to which our men moved up to the front lines, and gun-positions revealed by every flash, and dugouts foolishly frail against their 5.9s,[92] which in those early days we could only answer by a few pip squeaks.[93]

Ultimately the BEF directed its offensive energies in the first half of 1915 towards the capture of Aubers Ridge. Three major attacks were made to this end. starting with the Battle of Neuve Chapelle (10–13 March), and followed by the Battle of Aubers Ridge (9 May) and the Battle of Festubert in May (15–27 May). Ultimately, each offensive stalled and Aubers Ridge remained in German hands until it was finally abandoned in 1918. However, this first, painful experience of trench warfare

91 James Willcocks, *With the Indians in France* (London, Constable and Company Ltd., 1920), p.81.
92 Gibbs refers to the powerful German 5.9-inch howitzers, officially the *15cm schwere Feldhaubitze 13*. This highly effective weapon served German forces in both First and Second World Wars.
93 Philip Gibbs, *Now It Can Be Told* (Garden City, New York, 1920), pp.79-80.

prompted two broad schools of thought to emerge.[94] The first, and most prominent, regarded the German lines as an obstacle to be breached. In May, John French wrote of his desire to

> … break thro' this tremendous *crust* of defence which has been forming and consolidating throughout the winter: once we have done it I think we may get the Devils on the run. How I should love to have a real good 'go' at them in the open with lots of cavalry and horse artillery and run them to earth.[95]

The ambitious attacks of 1915 have been severely criticised. Lloyd George cursed "the infatuation of a break-through which haunted the western generals like a disease of the mind".[96] Yet battlefield experience suggested that, with proper preparation, cracking the "crust" was far from impossible. At Neuve Chapelle the BEF came "within an ace" of breaking through the German line, whilst the French Army achieved startling success at the opening of the Second Battle of Artois in May.[97]

The greatest problem with this method was the depth and resilience of German defences. It is a common misconception to picture the Western Front as two single trench lines facing one another. Even at this early stage of the war, German defences usually incorporated a second and third line, frequently supported by individual strongpoints and machine gun nests. An opening assault might crash through the first line, and sometimes the sheer speed of the advance could carry it to the second and even third lines, but it inevitably lost momentum as casualties mounted, ammunition dwindled and soldiers became exhausted.

The problem then lay in exploiting the initial advance. The movement of reserves was an exceptionally difficult business. Initially, reserve units would be forced to move through friendly trenches that were crowded with a mixture of equipment, engineers, artillery observers and wounded soldiers returning from the first attack. In particularly fierce engagements this could be a challenge in itself. James Willcocks described the problems at the Battle of Aubers Ridge:

> [The] trenches, difficult to pass through even when occupied only by the ordinary traffic were now in a state which beggars description. The German guns had been pouring high explosive and shrapnel into them all the morning; in many places the parapet had been blown in, blocking the way, while numbers of the dead and wounded were lying at the bottom of the trenches. The direction boards

94 Similar schools of thought also emerged in the French Army. See Krause, *Early Trench Tactics*, pp.6-8.
95 Quoted in Holmes, *Little Field Marshal*, p.294.
96 Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, Vol.1, p.289.
97 Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p.31; Krause, *Early Trench Tactics*, pp.69-70.

> had in many cases been destroyed … the nearer one got to the front, the more of a shambles it became …[98]

Having endured this hazardous passage to the front, the reserves would then face the unenviable task of crossing no-man's land, which would be strewn with the fallen from the first attack and under fire from enemy artillery. The movement to reach the German line was time consuming, incurred losses and was hard on the nerves of officers and men. On arrival in the enemy position the reserves would find a bewildering maze of shattered trenches littered with British and German casualties.

The level of confusion cannot be overstated. After the war, Major J. Buckley of 9th King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry wrote to James Edmonds in relation to the Battle of Loos, warning him: "The historian has no conception of the vagueness of everything at the time … nobody, from the brigade commanders downwards, had any idea of the situation at any stage of the proceedings."[99]

Information as to the general situation would have been provided before the reserves advanced, but even if it was accurate at moment of delivery, by the time they arrived at the German lines events had frequently rendered it out date. Inevitably, advancing reserves gravitated towards friendly soldiers, but this could mean they moved in the wrong direction, becoming embroiled in local fighting and losing sight of their overall objective. On the other hand, units that continued to advance to their intended destination often encountered the enemy in unexpected positions. Pockets of German resistance could deliver galling fire from the flank or rear, and surviving machine gun nests could delay an advance almost indefinitely until they were knocked out. Meanwhile, every hour that passed gave the enemy time to bring up reserves of their own; these reinforcements could occupy new lines or even launch the vigorous counter-attacks for which the German army was so well known. The experiences of Captain Kimber at the Battle of Aubers Ridge were not uncommon: "We crawled for hours above our waists in the mud and foul water of the German trenches, isolated and cut off by an enemy we could not see who was steadily reducing our numbers by very excellent sniping."[100]

As a result of these factors, reserves frequently arrived at their intended point bloodied, tired and disorganised. They then found themselves confronting an enemy who had had precious time to man his second or third line of defences. Faced with this problem, the infantry were often forced to deliver hasty assaults without the benefit of thorough artillery preparation. The results were predictable and tragic. Indeed, the experience could prove so harrowing that it could actually rout the unit entirely, as happened to reserves deployed from the inexperienced 21st and 24th Division at Loos.

98 Quoted in Adrian Bristow, *A Serious Disappointment*: *The Battle of Aubers Ridge, 1915 and the subsequent Munitions Scandal* (London, Leo Cooper, 1995), pp.102-103.
99 TNA CAB 45/121, Major J. Buckley to James Edmonds, 1 January 1927.
100 Quoted in Bristow, *A Serious Disappointment*, pp.120-121.

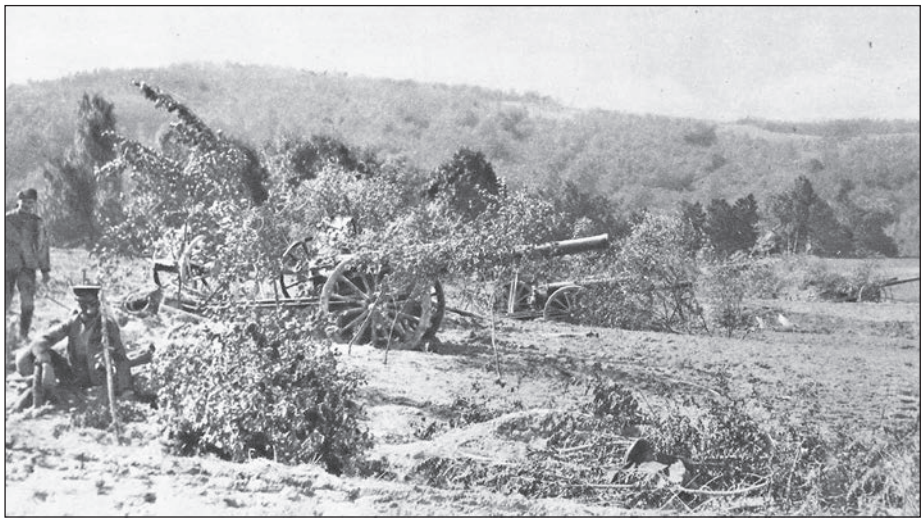
Recognising the problem of bringing forward reserves, both the British and French armies sought to maintain the momentum of the original attacks to such a point that the Germans would have no time to recover. In this regard the Allies were reaching towards the concept that would later grow into 'storm trooper' tactics, but the notion was not formalised and some of its flaws went unrecognised.[101] At Loos the BEF stressed "into the blue" infantry assaults that were not assigned strict objectives, but which instead sought to maintain general forward momentum.[102] However, the emphasis on speed precluded the opportunity for consolidation and reorganisation. This created problems, as attackers lost direction in the chaos of battle and blundered into fresh German positions, or were struck by fire from unanticipated directions.[103] Eventually, the initial attack was brought to a halt as a result, and the battle defaulted into the predictable pattern of British reserves battling forward in the confusing conditions described above.

The problems experienced by the Allies in maintaining momentum, either through sustaining the initial assault or through the carefully timed deployment of reserves, pointed towards the unbreakable law of diminishing returns. However, this was not yet fully understood. Instead, Allied generals sought to refine the methods that had achieved the opening day's success, calling upon ever greater firepower and manpower, in the hope that eventually the German front could be ruptured.

Contrary to popular belief, the British were not static in their approach to the offensive. Hurricane bombardments were fired at Neuve Chapelle and Aubers Ridge, a prolonged bombardment followed by a night attack was employed at Festubert, and a combination of methodical shelling and poison gas was used at Loos. However, all the offensives ultimately failed due to a combination of inadequate resources, command errors, communication failures and the stubborn resilience of the German defenders. Initial success could be achieved – "a delusive promise of breakthrough" in the words of Basil Liddell Hart – but it always gave way to bloody attrition as follow up attacks floundered.[104]

The second school of thought sought to turn attrition to the BEF's advantage. Proponents argued that instead of ambitious offensives designed to punch clean through the enemy position, better results could be gained from a methodical approach that strove to capture limited, manageable objectives. The attackers would then consolidate the captured ground and repel the inevitable German counter-attacks. The fact that the Germans would be forced to assault over open ground would mean they could be repulsed with heavy losses.[105]

101 Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, pp.54-56.
102 Lloyd, *Loos,* p.78.
103 Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.2, pp.199-200.
104 Liddell Hart, *Real War 1914-1918*, p.214.
105 Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914-1918* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2004) p.78.



A group of concealed 60-pounder guns. These modern weapons were in desperately short supply in 1915. (Editor's collection)

By employing this method the BEF would chew its way into the German position, inflicting heavy casualties on their opponent as they did so. It was from this train of thought that the much discussed concept of "bite and hold", a phrase coined by Major-General Sir Henry Rawlinson, emerged.[106] The concept of a methodical assault rather than a great rush attracted a broad church, with adherents including Rawlinson, Lieutenant-General Sir William Robertson and even Winston Churchill, who offered a typically eccentric view of the method with a plan he termed "Attack by the Spade", that involved digging approach saps on a broad front and then fighting a prolonged, close range battle until the German defenders were exhausted.[107] However, it must be emphasised that at this stage of the war these views were nebulous and informal. The easy short hand of bite and hold suggests a degree of uniformity that did not exist in 1915. In reality, although unified in their desire for a methodical attack, proponents differed on many points of detail.[108]

There is a temptation, born of hindsight, to view bite and hold as an operational panacea for the problems of the Western Front. Several factors militated against its employment in 1915. The first, as discussed above, was the strategic situation.

106 For a full discussion of this concept, see Paul Harris and Sanders Marble, 'The 'Step by Step' Approach: British Military Thought and Operational Method on the Western Front 1915–1917' in *War in History*, 15(1), 2008, pp.17-42.
107 TNA WO 158/831, 'Variants of the Offensive', 3 December, 1915.
108 Harris and Marble, 'Step by Step', pp.21-23.

Bite and hold emphasised prolonged fighting that required an enormous expenditure of ammunition, and which would only result in small gains of territory. The BEF simply did not have those resources and it is doubtful that the War Council would have accepted such costly engagements that, by definition, would not result in clear cut victories suitable for public consumption. Furthermore, operations of such limited scope would be of little assistance to the beleaguered French and Russians.[109] The second point, and one which is almost entirely overlooked, is that in 1915 the British Army lacked the firepower and tactics to be sure of resisting the German counter-attacks. Rawlinson had based his concept of "hold" on his experience at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, where on 12 March the Germans had mounted an ill-fated counter-attack that had been mown down by British fire.[110] However, this particular German attack had been hastily organised and was launched without adequate artillery support.[111] Such mistakes were rare and for most of 1915 German counter-attacks were ruthlessly effective. As Edmonds noted, the Germans were "far better equipped for such warfare, with trench mortars, grenades, etc., than was the B.E.F.".[112] The savage fighting for control of Hill 60 in spring 1915 suggested that the "hold" portion of any operation could be prolonged, costly and difficult. Billy Congreve recalled:

> The 5th Division are having an awful time on Hill 60. The men who are lucky enough to come back say that it is the worst fighting in the war. I believe that, to date, we have lost about 60 officers and 1,700 other ranks in five days on a place about the size of the centre part in Trafalgar Square. We are so hopelessly out-gunned.[113]

Similarly, the struggle to retain captured ground following the initial assault at the Battle of Loos revealed the effectiveness of German counter-attacks. In such circumstances, attrition was a sword which could cut both ways.

Ultimately, the methods employed by the British Army in 1915 came to combine elements of both approaches without completely embracing either. By the end of the year, there was an emphasis on methodical preparation and sustained bombardment to support the opening assault, but this was paired with a desire to have the infantry rush through and drive into the heart of the enemy position, with reserves following up to

109 Rawlinson himself recognised these limitations. See Prior & Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, pp.78-79.
110 Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, p.63; G.C. Wynne, *Landrecies to Cambrai: Case Studies of German Offensive and Defensive Operations on the Western Front 1914-17* (Solihull, Helion & Co., 2011) pp.25-26.
111 Wynne, *Landrecies to Cambrai*, p.26.
112 Edmonds, *Official History* 1915, Vol.1, p.167.
113 Norman (ed.), *Armageddon Road,* p.124.

sustain the momentum.[114] Yet victory proved elusive. Inexperienced, under gunned, and facing a foe of formidable fighting power, every British offensive of the year was eventually fought to a standstill at the cost of heavy casualties. Edmonds admitted that "the enemy undoubtedly had the best of the fighting."[115]

1915 would serve as a bloody apprenticeship for the BEF. Edmonds, whilst acknowledging the human cost of battles he described as "tactically disappointing and strategically disastrous", saw this as an important step in the development of the army, noting "There is more to be learnt from ill-success – which is, after all, the true experience – than from victories, which are often attributable less to the excellence of the victor's plans than to the weaknesses or mistakes of his opponent."[116] The army was indeed learning, but it was a slow and inconsistent process, the difficulties of which are belied by the smooth and predictable image created by the term "learning curve". For example, Edmonds was highly critical of the failure to treat the Western Front as a siege operation, writing:

> … by some mischance it was named and treated as "trench-warfare", something little different to open warfare. The broad conception … varied little from that of open warfare as evolved in pre-war "doctrine" and laid down in pre-war manuals, where trenches and barbed wire did not exist. Trench-warfare came to be regarded as a special problem to be solved by "the bomb and the bayonet", and the old lessons of siege-warfare were not applied.[117]

Senior officers, facing new responsibilities and hampered by the perennial shortage of effective staff officers, did not always absorb or even grasp the lessons of battle.[118] Errors made at the top perpetuated inexperience amongst the soldiers, for as Paddy Griffith notes, for front line battalions "inexperience in one battle ensured the perpetuation of inexperience in the next, and so on in a vicious spiral. It often took a long time and many many casualties, before units could hope to build up the significant hard cores of veterans that they needed for full combat efficiency."[119] It would take much further bloodletting in 1916 before the BEF became truly battle hardened.

The failure of the British offensives of 1915 revealed the prescience of Kitchener's earlier prediction. It also emphasised the deadly dilemma facing the War Council. The only way to avoid heavy losses on the Western Front was to avoid fighting there at all, but to do that risked the defeat, or at the very least the detachment from the alliance, of France or Russia, and by extension the defeat of Britain herself. As a result,

114 Lloyd, *Loos*, p.78.
115 Edmonds, *Official History 1915,* Vol.1, p.vi.
116 James Edmonds, *The Memoirs of Sir James Edmonds* (London, Tom Donovan, 2013), p.363; Edmonds, *Official History 1915,* Vol.1, p.vi.
117 Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.1, p.152.
118 Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, pp.91-93.
119 Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p.64.

the ill-prepared BEF was forced to fight battles that did not suit the British position, and which promised little of either tactical or strategic value. Such was the cost of being the junior partner in a coalition war. Kitchener himself recognised the truth of this situation in August when he commented sadly: "unfortunately we had to make war as we must, and not as we should like."[120]

120 IWM, Sir John French Papers, Lord Kitchener to French, 20 August, 1915.

2

The Supply of Munitions to the Army, 1915

John Mason Sneddon

Introduction

1915 was a year of improvisation, invention, trial and disappointment that exposed the total unpreparedness of the British nation, politically, militarily and industrially, to fight a modern war of the type evolving on the Western Front. This chapter will take two examples of munitions production from 1915, namely guns and high explosive shells, and grenades and mortars, to briefly illustrate "the painful and weary stages" by which Britain started to procure the equipment necessary to defeat the Imperial German Army.

Given the passage of time, it is difficult to fully comprehend the formidable problems experienced, first by the War Office, and then the Ministry of Munitions, in equipping an expanding army with all of the necessities of war, while at the same time servicing two campaigns, one in France, the other in the Dardanelles, both of which were consuming equipment at a prodigious rate. While Britain was still a great industrial power she lagged behind Germany, and probably France and the USA, in the industrial application of advances in science and technology. Her munitions industry was small[1] and, except for some aspects of naval technology, was not at the forefront of technological or scientific innovation. This was also true across her wider chemical and manufacturing industries, all symptomatic of a society that ignored, or failed to understand, the importance of linking scientific research to industrial innovation, and the role that this played in creating national wealth and prestige.

By late 1914 the Royal Ordnance Factories, and the great civilian munitions companies, such as Armstrong and Vickers, were working to capacity and failing to fulfil even a fraction of the increasingly large orders being placed by the War Office. The delays in production were systemic and due to a multitude of factors in which insufficient industrial capacity, a shortage of skilled labour and lack of essential raw

1 Excluding naval construction.

materials figure predominately. There was also a new factor in the equation – trench warfare – that was to present the War Office, and industry, with a number of daunting challenges. These included the design and manufacture of new weapons not normally provided to the army such as heavy howitzers, high explosive (HE) shell, trench mortars, rifle and hand grenades, as well as the myriad of other items of equipment designed to make the trench-bound soldier more militarily effective.

Composed of professional troops and led by experienced officers, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of 1914 was quick to recognise the changing nature of the battlefield once trench warfare became established. By late September of that year GHQ was requesting the weapons it needed to deal with the new situation. However the War Office was slow to respond, not through neglect of the army's demands, but more as the result of an ingrained cultural heritage arising out of the policies, procedures and attitudes that existed pre-war around the process of providing new equipment for the army. This had tended to be a leisurely process, with much testing and evaluation of prototypes, as the Ordnance Board sought to develop equipment that would deliver a high degree of performance no matter where it was used. In modern industrial warfare this was a luxury that could no longer be afforded but, still fixated on the pre-war model of a relatively short conflict, the Directorate of Artillery resisted the need to develop new weapons that, by their estimate, probably would not be available before the fighting ended.

In contrast to the inertia shown by the home establishment, the necessary flexibility to develop innovative solutions to trench warfare was to be found in three formations staffed by the Royal Engineers: the Army Workshops; the Research Unit established at GHQ France by Sir John French; and Colonel Louis Jackson's section FW3 within the War Office. Of these Jackson's FW3 was by far the most significant and the second part of this chapter will show how it came to meet the insatiable demands for equipment generated by the trench war.

The Great Shell Scandal

> The old-fashioned little British Army was such an infinitely small proportion of the world's demands for munitions that looking after its equipment was not all that more difficult than buying a straw hat from Harrods.
>
> Kitchener to the President of the Board of Trade, 1914.[2]

Many factors contributed to the "great shell scandal of 1915" starting with the re-equipping of all European armies with Quick-firing (QF) artillery in the opening decade of the new century. This moved the military into uncharted territory for none had experience of the employment of this new artillery in battle. There was a proxy

2 Quoted by Hew Strachan, *The First World War. Vol.I: To Arms* (Oxford: University Press, 2001), p.1066.

however. Britain, France and Germany all sent military observers to the Russo-Japanese and Balkan wars, but their reports of the impact of QF artillery on ammunition consumption tended to be discounted by their home-based military planners who were inclined to attribute the reports of excessive shell expenditure to the poor training of ill-disciplined troops.

Other factors also came into play. Leaving aside the financial arguments against the stockpiling of large reserves of artillery shell there were serious questions relating to logistics. If the consumption of artillery ammunition were high then it would be necessary to substantially increase the investment in transportation and other support required along the lines of communication, a cost conveniently side-stepped by European planners when they developed their models of what a future war would look like. To take Britain as an example, the Imperial General Staff saw no need for large reserves of artillery shell for their working model assumed that the BEF would be involved in four major battles, each of three days duration, in a campaign that would probably last no longer than six months.[3] Before we become too critical of this scenario as an example of Britain's unpreparedness for war, it is salutatory to recall that both the French and German High Commands had similar models and only maintained stocks of artillery ammunition to sustain three months of fighting.

One consequence of this type of modelling was that the high consumption of munitions in the opening battles of August and September came as a shock to all armies fighting on the Western Front. Before the war was even seven weeks old Falkenhayn, the newly appointed Chief of the German General Staff, complained:

> By mid September 1914 the spectre of the shortage of ammunition was already apparent. Consumption exceeded peacetime estimates many times over. Almost every shot had to be counted, and the failure of a single ammunition train, or any other slight accident, threatened to render the whole section of the front defenceless.[4]

The situation was equally dire for the French. The Tenth Army, involved in heavy fighting between the Vimy Ridge and Lens in October 1914, had the ammunition for its 75mm field guns reduced to 300 rounds a day, then 200, barely enough for 10 minutes shooting at the maximum rate of fire. The crisis for the Germans increased in October and November. In quiet sectors of the line, such as the Vosges, artillery was limited to a single round per day in order to supply the Fourth Army, which was fighting desperately to break through the Allied lines at Ypres. Even then its field

3 This model was also adopted by the Treasurery when calculating the army estimates and determined the amount of munitions and other equipment available to the army on the outbrerak of war.

4 Quoted in Brig.-Gen. J.E. Edmonds & Capt. G.C. Wynne. *Military Operations. France and Belgium, 1915 Vol. I* (London: Imperial War Museum, 1995), p.38.

artillery was limited to 13,440 rounds a day, and its howitzers to 4000 rounds a day. These figures may have appeared a crisis to the gunners of the Fourth Army but, such quantities were lavish compared to that available to the British.

By the end of 1914 the double crises of a shell shortage, combined with a lack of medium and heavy artillery, was being openly discussed by junior officers such as Billy Congreve,[5] senior officers such as Henry Wilson, Sub-Chief of Staff at GHQ, and by Charles à Court Repington, War Correspondent of the *The Times*, and friend of Sir John French. Repington claimed that his attempts to inform the public by alluding to the deficiencies were censored by his editor as inconvenient to the government.[6]

Nor were the War Office unaware of the problem. In early September Sir John French requested increased deliveries of shell, which the War Office refused to meet, sending him only sufficient for 10 days consumption along with a warning letter: "This will run our stocks very low, and we cannot supply at this rate until the manufacturers reach their maximum output."

On the 28 September an exasperated Sir John French telegraphed the War Office:

> For 18-pounders the proposal is to dispatch 15,000 rounds a week, or 7 rounds per gun per day. This is far too small an amount. During the last fortnight there has been an average expenditure of 14 rounds per gun, notwithstanding the fact that these guns have but been lightly engaged on the Aisne.

On 7 October the War Office bureaucrats struck back:

> With reference to your letter of 28th September I am commanded by the Army Council to point out that they have provided, in the first instance, and have sent out replenishments in almost every case up to the quantities of gun ammunition that were laid down before the war.[7]

What is being referred to here is the method by which the total number of shells per gun was calculated. This gave a pre-war tariff of 1000 rounds for the 13- and 18-pounders; 800 rounds for the 4.5-inch howitzer and 500 for each 60-pounder. However the whole tariff was not immediately available to the gunner as it was distributed in stages throughout the Lines of Communication, each stage being filled

5 Terry Norman (ed), *Billy Congreve. Armageddon Road. A VCs Diary 1914-16* (London: William Kimber 1992) p.108.

6 Lieut.-Col. C à Repington. *The First World War 1914-1918* (London: Constable & Co Ltd 1920). Vol. 1. p.34.

7 The above quotations are drawn from David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs Vol. I* (London: Oldhams Press 1938) p.85.

up from the previous one as the ammunition was expended. In 1914 the tariff for the 18-pounder field gun was distributed as follows:[8]

Gun limbers	24 rounds
Battery wagons	152
Brigade ammunition column	76
Divisional ammunition column	126
Total forward	*378*
Divisional ammunition park	150
Ordnance Depots	472
Total tariff	*1000*

Any decrease in the actual number of shells in this supply chain appear to have been interpreted by GHQ as a shell shortage even if the guns at the sharp end had sufficient ammunition to do the job. Thus there is a bureaucratic dimension to the concept of the shell shortage that existed in the minds of senior officers fixated in comparing the tariff with the actual number of shells available.

The Supply of Guns

As the Boer War (1899–1902) was ending Lord Roberts established a committee under Major-General George Marshall to look at the future provision of artillery.[9] This quickly determined the need to re-equip with modern Quick-Firing Field Artillery and, drawing upon their Boer War experience, decided that mobility was to be of over-riding importance so there was no recommendation to provide the army with heavy artillery due to its perceived immobility.[10] This decision was central to creating the two inter-locking challenges that faced the BEF on the Western Front in 1915: the lack of heavy artillery and appropriate ammunition, mainly HE, for such guns.

The changing nature of the battlefield, from mobile warfare to one of siege warfare in the field, stimulated the demand for larger guns and HE shell but the munitions industry was not geared up to supply either. Only the Royal Ordnance Factories,

8 General Sir Martin Farndale, *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery. Western Front 1914-18.* (Woolwich: The Royal Artillery Institution 1986). p.6.

9 General Sir J Headlam. *The History of the Royal Artillery. Vol II 1899-1914.* (Woolwich: The Royal Artillery Institution.1937) pp.13-15.

10 Defined as guns/howitzers over 6-inch calibre. The Boer War did result in the British Army adopting the 60-pounder gun as a heavy field gun, but this weapon was only available in very small numbers and was hampered by uncertain doctrine. On this point, see Spencer Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902–1914* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), pp.117-132.

Vickers, Armstrong, Beardmore and the Coventry Ordnance Works had experience in manufacturing artillery pieces. When re-equipping the artillery after the Boer War, the War Office had placed the bulk of the orders with the Royal Gun Factory at Woolwich, distributing smaller orders across the civilian 'trade' that were soon filled and, as a consequence, no civilian gun maker provided the army with an item of field artillery in the five years leading up to the outbreak of First World War. The Royal Ordnance Factories, on completion of the re-equipment phase, had responded to the successive cuts in the Army Estimates by laying off skilled workers and selling or moth-balling their equipment, so that by August 1914 they were probably working at less than 50% capacity.

Only three pieces of heavy artillery had been developed since the Boer War, two 9.2-inch guns (not howitzers) delivered in 1913 by Beardmores and one 9.2-inch howitzer from Vickers in May 1914, both for "evaluation and report" in the hope of stimulating orders from the War Office. On the outbreak of war the companies which had expertise in producing big calibre guns were immediately swamped with orders from the Admiralty and at first were not in a position to meet the demands of the War Office. This was despite the fact that the first War Office orders were small, being limited to the anticipated rate of replacement for field guns lost or damaged in combat. By the end of September, with the industrial response to the initial orders still sluggish, the War Office was placing increasingly large orders, including the first for heavy artillery, to meet the urgent demands from GHQ for bigger calibre weapons to deal with German defences and "to keep down the enemy's long range artillery fire".[11]

By the end of 1914 the Royal Ordnance Factories were working to capacity and substantial orders had been placed with the civilian companies, who were being encouraged to expand their factories through grants of money made available by David Lloyd George, then serving as Chancellor of the Exchequer. The War Office anticipated delivery on these orders by June 1915 but, given the scale of the demands, and competition from the Admiralty for industrial assets, this was unduly optimistic. The discrepancy between guns ordered and guns delivered at the end of June 1915 is illustrative:[12]

Gun	Ordered	Delivered
18-pdr.	3,628	802
4.5-inch How.	530	209
60-pdr.	160	33
9.2-inch How.	32	18

11 *The Official History of the Ministry of Munitions. Vol.X The Supply of Munitions. Part I Guns* (Facsimile produced by The Naval & Military Press Ltd. nd.) p.3.

12 Ibid., p.4.

Very few modern, or even obsolescent, heavy guns were available from any source. Sixteen 6-inch guns were removed from the coastal defences and put on railway mountings, the first eight arriving in France in January 1915. A single brigade consisting of twenty-four 6-inch 30 cwt. howitzers was in existence, and a further eighty of these guns were collected from various colonial stations and sent to France. The single 9.2-inch howitzer was sent as soon as ammunition was available and, until February 1915, was the only British heavy howitzer at the front.

The whole question of heavy artillery was to be transformed by the creation of the Ministry of Munitions. One of Lloyd George's first acts was to call a "gun conference" with the French at Boulogne on 20 June 1915 which identified the need for increased production of heavy guns. This called for 600 60-pdr guns, 400 6-inch howitzers and 292 9.2 or 8-inch howitzers which, when we add the increased number of field guns, required Britain to manufacture 8,881 pieces of artillery, of which 7,240 were to be in the field by March 1916.

BEF Shell Supply 1915

The supply of shell was constrained by two factors: industrial capacity and technical difficulties associated with the introduction of HE shell. Problems in both these areas had been encountered by the War Office before the creation of the Ministry of Munitions but became more significant as shell production increased to satisfy the artillery manufactured under the Ministry's gun programme.

Industrial Capacity

Manufacturing shells by the million required industrial plant and at first the Ministry of Munitions underestimated the demand stimulated by its own gun programme. In July panic set in with the realisation that the current industrial capacity was incapable of making, and filling, the number of shells required but, rather than expand existing capacity, the Ministry decided to build its own National Shell Factories.

As working with explosives carries risks, time was needed to identify suitable sites for new factories. Such locations were comparatively few. Sites had to be in places that were relatively isolated for safety reasons, yet close to both major communication links and a potential work force. Even when locations were identified factory construction was slow due to shortage of materials and skilled workmen and, once completed, there were further delays due to a shortage of qualified staff to supervise the workforce. Shell filling is intrinsically dangerous, requiring supervisory staff to be familiar with an enormous amount of practical detail. In 1915 this knowledge was limited to a small number of individuals in the Royal Ordnance Factories and the pressure on them to fill existing contracts was so great that it was difficult to release them to train supervisors for the new factories. These factors, compounded together, significantly slowed the supply of shell to the army throughout 1915, an issue that was not resolved until the new filling factories became fully operational in early 1916.

The expansion of industrial capacity also stimulated the demand for skilled labour but the British workforce was largely unskilled, a consequence of trade union 'closed shops' and the smallness of many companies, both of which limited the training of craftsmen. The shortage was compounded in late 1914 by the drain of skilled men into the army. The competition for the remaining pool of skilled labour became intense with men moving factories at short notice on the offer of better wages. In late 1915 the output of 8-inch howitzer carriages by the Coventry Ordnance Works was put in jeopardy when 100 men walked out, while at Beardmores production of heavy artillery almost ceased when skilled workers, recruited from Canada, returned home after the government refused to pay separation allowances to dependents. Attempts to solve labour shortages through dilution were also fraught with difficulties. The skill and physical strength required to make heavy calibre guns precluded dilution with female labour and when this was attempted for the lighter calibres production was disrupted by strikes.

In addition to its labour problems British industry was incapable of meeting the sudden demand for raw materials generated by the war. In many areas, such as chemicals or specialised steels, the home-based manufacturing capacity was very small for in the years before the war industry had increasingly relied upon cheaper, but superior, German imports. This reliance on overseas sourcing extended to other industries. The provision of chlorine for military use serves as a single illustrative example of the adaptations required by British industry to meet wartime demands. Chlorine was produced in significant quantities in Britain but most was used, as the gas, in industrial process such as making bleaching powder with the result that there was limited experience within the industry in liquefying the gas and storing it in metal cylinders. Those companies who required the gas in this form had tended to import their supplies from Germany. Therefore, after Colonel Jackson's recommendation that chlorine be used for gas attacks a whole new industrial process had to be developed to produce the necessary volume of liquefied chlorine.

Shell Manufacture

With the emphasis on mobility the majority of British artillery was supplied with shrapnel shell as this was seen to be more effective than HE in dealing with enemy infantry in the open or protected by shallow, temporary trenches. As a consequence there was little experience of the manufacture and use of HE shell and the increased demand that followed the advent of trench warfare was to present the Royal Ordnance Factories with a number of challenges. In autumn 1914, when Sir John French first requested HE shell for the 18-pdr field gun, the Royal Ordnance Laboratory had no experience in making such shells, were uncertain whether a satisfactory fuse existed, and were unsure how to fill the shell with explosive. These technical problems assumed serious proportions in the spring of 1915 following the introduction of new, untried explosives such as amatol, and it would take several months of trial and error before

effective methods of filling and detonating shells filled with amatol mixtures were evolved.

To meet demand it was necessary to revise methods of manufacture to accommodate mass production. For example, factories found that they needed to re-design the shell casing so it could be filled more rapidly by semi-skilled labour. This necessitated a change to the base plugs which were screwed into the bottom of the shell to prevent the hot gases from the propellant charge penetrating into the explosives. The making and fitting of these base plates was a highly skilled job and a limiting factor in the attempt to increase HE shell production. The first solution was to dispense with them altogether but test firings demonstrated that this led to significant "prematures" with the shell bursting in the gun barrel. The second solution was to rivet the base plate into position instead of screwing, which proved satisfactory, reduced costs and halved production time. From April 1915 the War Office specified that all HE shell had to be fitted with riveted base plates. Unfortunately many sub-contractors, especially those in America and Canada, were slow in implementing this instruction and significant delays were experienced in delivering HE to the BEF when large batches of these shells failed inspection at Woolwich.

This inspection process, carried out at Woolwich before munitions were issued to the army, was itself a major bottleneck in the supply chain that could delay the delivery of essential munitions, including artillery shells. In 1915 the Inspectorate was still small in numbers and, working to their pre-war standards, were meticulous and finicky in their work, often rejecting whole batches of shell for any minute deviation from the approved specification. The slowness of the inspection led to periods when shell production had to be halted because the large numbers of shell piling up waiting inspection were occupying all the available storage space, both in the shell factories and at Woolwich.

As indicated above the rapid expansion in shell production through the recruitment of new companies, not only in Britain, but also the USA and Canada, led to a serious fall in quality. We have already touched upon the problems of prematures resulting from defective base plates but the opposite, namely failing to explode, was also a significant problem. Some idea of this significance can be gleaned from a private letter to Dr Christopher Addison, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Munitions, describing a series of shoots south of Arras.[13] The letter is dated May 1916 but the information probably holds true for late 1915. The writer reports than on 17 May a 4.5 howitzer shoot gave 9 good shells, 11 blind and 7 imperfect while another on 9 June gave 4 good, 15 blind and 26 imperfect. For a heavy battery shoot on 12 May a 15-inch howitzer fired 2 rounds with 1 blind, and a 12-inch howitzer battery 15 rounds, of which 9 were blind.[14]

13 Bodleian Library, Oxford. Addison Ms c30 folio 303. The name of the officer, and his battalion, are redacted in the copy of the letter in the Addison papers.

14 It is probable that figures were replicated on the Somme.

Explosives

On the eve of the First World War the only approved explosive for Royal Artillery shells was picric acid (lyddite) but with most Continental armies using Trinitrotoluene (TNT) as the explosive fill this alternative was under leisurely consideration by the Directorate of Artillery. On the outbreak of war the trials with TNT were speeded up and on 11 August 1914 the Ordnance Board recommended TNT as the fill for all shells above 6-inch calibre, and for all smaller calibre shells once the supply of lyddite had been exhausted. However this decision was frustrated by limitations in the supply of TNT. It was produced by only two companies, not as a major product, but as a by-product when making other chemical intermediates for the dye industry and consequently the synthesis was slow and wasteful of chemicals that were now in short supply following the loss of German imports. With French assistance a satisfactory method of synthesising TNT was developed by the spring of 1915 and, although this was an important step forward, due to the smallness of the British chemical industry it could not provide all of the high explosive required.

By late 1914 it was apparent that the BEF was heading for a crisis in the supply of HE shell and in response the government created the Committee on High Explosives, chaired by Lord Moulton, to advise the War Office on the best way to utilise the limited resources available. The Committee quickly determined that, given the projected demand for HE shell, British industry was incapable of producing the amount of either TNT or lyddite required and recommended that the army adopt mixed explosives in which ammonium nitrate was the major component. This suggestion ran into strong opposition from the Directorate of Artillery. They argued that these explosives would not be powerful enough for use in artillery shells and that the testing of the various explosive mixtures and fuses to find out how to detonate them would take many months, by which time the war may be over.

These objections were over-ruled by Lord Kitchener and the first ammonal trials took place on 11 February 1915. These quickly established that ammonal was difficult to detonate with artillery fuses and it was abandoned as an explosive for shells, although it continued to be used as a grenade and mortar bomb filling until a shortage of aluminium led to its replacement with amatol in the spring of 1917. Amatol, a variation on a very successful French high explosive called Schneiderite, was a simple mixture of ammonium nitrate and TNT and, easier to detonate, came into widespread use for artillery shells by November 1915. Despite using much more TNT, amatol had a number of advantages over both pure TNT and ammonal in that it was a more powerful explosive and, perhaps most significantly, un-purified TNT could be used in the mixture, dramatically reducing the use of expensive chemicals. The 40/60 mixtures could be liquefied allowing shells to be filled by pouring and for the more

common 20/80 mix the Ministry of Munitions learned the French method of shell filling by compression.[15]

A shell (or bullet) is fired from the gun by means of a propellant charge contained in the brass shell case. For British artillery this was normally cordite and with the increased demand for artillery shells came a crisis in the supply of propellant. Most cordite went to the Royal Navy and by late 1914 it was becoming difficult to meet the needs of both services due to restricted supplies of acetone, an essential chemical in the manufacture of cordite and previously obtained from Germany. In the spring of 1915 a new form of cordite using ether, rather than acetone, was developed but this did not immediately resolve the supply problem. The difficulties in scaling up the laboratory synthesis to industrial level production were not overcome until December 1915. After this date cordite supply was guaranteed by the output of the new factory at Gretna.

Two other factors should be considered in any discussion about the supply of heavy artillery and high explosive shell to the army in 1915; namely inter-service competition for supplies, and the need to provide war materials to Allied nations. Throughout the war there was more or less continuous competition between the Admiralty and the Ministry of Munitions for gun making facilities and other industrial assets, a situation aggravated by the position adopted by some of the armament companies. Before the war some, such as Armstrong and Vickers, had relied on naval orders for their very survival and now repaid customer loyalty by giving preference to the Admiralty. For example, in late 1915 Vickers bluntly informed the Ministry of Munitions that "the speeding up of Admiralty work has made it impossible to get any machining done on howitzer work".[16]

The second factor was the provision of war materials to Britain's allies, particularly the ill-equipped Russians. This had a political as well as military dimension and although the Russians were usually provided with rejected or obsolescent equipment, the provision of guns and ammunition on a considerable scale in 1915-16 inevitably had a knock-on effect of deliveries of munitions to the BEF.

The Trench Warfare Department (TWD)

When trench warfare developed on the Aisne in late September 1914 the War Office was inundated with requests for all sorts of kit, such as mining equipment and trench diggers, not normally issued to Royal Engineer Field Companies. The task of meeting these unusual demands fell to Colonel Louis Jackson RE, Head of Section FW3

15 Amatol was a mixture of ammonium nitrate and TNT in variable proportions depending upon its use. For artillery shells 20/80 was the most common mix although 40/60 was also used in some larger shells.

16 *The Official History of the Ministry of Munitions. Vol.X The Supply of Munitions. Part I Guns*, (Facsimile produced by The Naval & Military Press Ltd. nd.) p.91.

Leach Catapult in action. (Editor's collection).

in the Directorate of Fortifications and Works. As a consequence Jackson became something of the War Office authority on trench warfare.[17] This role was expanded towards the end of 1914 when, with the encouragement of the Master General of the Ordnance, Major-General von Donop, Jackson introduced improved versions of the jam-pot and hairbrush hand grenades that were the staple output of the RE Field Company workshops in France.[18] At the same time Jackson's small unit developed the West Spring Gun and the Leach Catapult as alternatives to trench mortars and, at the behest of GHQ, initiated experiments into the use of flamethrowers, armoured fighting vehicles and chemical weapons. To free Jackson from his other duties he was appointed head of a new section: FW3A. After the German gas attack in April 1915 Lord Kitchener added to his responsibilities by making him responsible for the development of offensive and defensive chemical warfare.

Following transfer from the War Office to the Ministry of Munitions, in June 1915 FW3A was completely transformed and Jackson, promoted Lieutenant-General,

17 Colonel, later Major-General Sir Louis Jackson RE, had been chief instructor in field fortifications and siege warfare at Chatham before he retired from the army in 1913.

18 Jackson's hairbrush grenade was a metal box containing ammatol attached to a wooded paddle with a short handle to aid throwing. He used the same friction igniter as the iconic German 'potato-masher' grenade.

became Controller of the new Trench Warfare Department (TWD). This organisation grew rapidly in size and importance when Lloyd George transferred responsibility for all grenades and mortars from the War Office to the new department.

Within the Ministry the TWD was to remain an anomaly. The TWD possessed a very distinct culture and had methods of doing things that were markedly distinct from the other divisions within the Ministry. Firstly, there were its methods of manufacture. When Major-General von Donop authorised Jackson to develop grenades he, acutely aware of the supply problems in the munitions industry, stipulated that Jackson must not approach any company already engaged in war work, or utilise any raw materials or labour essential to the war effort. The consequence of these strictures was that the TWD had to build up a network of small companies, none of which had experience of weapons production, in order to produce its munitions. Therefore the weapons had to be designed to be as simple as possible and made from the minimum number of components, for these small firms would, at best, have a labour force with limited skills employing machinery that was not of the latest design. To give some idea of the operation, in September 1916 the demand for Mills bombs was running at 1.5 million a week and the TWD had to contract almost 200 separate firms to meet the order, with its Outside Engineering Branch managing the complex supply chain of providing raw materials, assembling the completed weapons and quality assuring the manufacturing process at all stages.

Secondly, the TWD was the only division within the Ministry that had the authority to undertake all three activities in munitions production: namely research and development, manufacture, and issue to the army. Thirdly, the TWD maintained training schools, in which army instructors were instructed in the use of the weapons it produced, and retained close contact with its end user, the army fighting in France.

From the surviving papers it would appear that the TWD discharged two research functions. Firstly there were the in-house inventions, predominantly in chemical weapons and infantry equipment such as sniper scopes, steel helmets and other forms of body armour. Its second role was probably the most important. Its research staff, mainly RE officers, had the knack of taking the inventions of others, such as Mills and Stokes, and turning their prototypes into robust battlefield weapons. Throughout 1915 the TWD made significant contributions to the development and manufacture of the Mills bomb, the 2-inch medium mortar, the Stokes 3- and 4-inch mortars, and introduced the 9.2-inch heavy mortar from the French, all of which ensured that these weapons, although still in need of development, were available in excess for the Somme battles of 1916.[19]

19 It is not my intention to present any technical details of the weapons mentioned. For those desirous of further information there is the work of Anthony Saunders, *Weapons of the Trench War 1914-1918* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), and many excellent web sites (for example www.inert-ord.net).

This last point needs emphasising. It was recognised at the time, driven by urgent necessity and demands from GHQ, that many weapons were introduced into battle before they were perfected. For example in August 1915 First Army planners realised that their proposed use of smoke candles would not mask the enemy machine gunners on the Hohenzollern Redoubt and demanded smoke bombs. This gave Jackson less than three weeks to manufacture, from a crude sketch by Wilfred Stokes, a 4-inch mortar and develop appropriate ammunition in conjunction with the First Army workshop in France. That this onerous task was completed in time is an excellent demonstration of the flexibility and efficiency of Jackson's TWD in meeting the army's needs, in this case ensuring that smoke, delivered by mortar bombs, was available to General Sir Douglas Haig on the first day of the Battle of Loos.

Grenade Supply

By August 1914 the Ordnance Board had approved one grenade for service use, the 1908 Model No.1 Percussion Grenade, but with no pressure from the War Office to equip the army the Royal Ordnance Workshop had only manufactured about 400, mostly for evaluation and training, although about 50 may have been taken to France with the BEF. A private source of grenades was the Cotton Powder Company, set up by Martin Hales to manufacture his patented rifle and hand grenades. In 1914 his rifle grenade was under consideration by the Ordnance Board as a possible armament for aircraft, but there was no interest in his hand grenade, which was similar to the No.1 in design, both having the same Japanese parent. They looked like a medieval mace, having a long throwing handle attached to the grenade body but differed in some details of engineering and used different fuses and explosives. Both were percussion grenades with the detonator on the top of the grenade body which, when struck, triggered the explosion. The Hales variation had long streamers attached to the handle to stabilise the grenade in flight and ensured that it always landed head downwards. The percussion detonators made these weapons risky unless wielded with skill and the grenades were considered so dangerous that they could only be handled by specially trained Sappers.

Martin Hales and his patented rifle grenade. (*The War Illustrated*, 3 April 1915)

The defects in both the No.1 and the Hales probably outweighed their utility as close combat weapons and although the

Royal Workshops at Woolwich, and the Cotton Powder Company, worked to make improvements both grenades remained awkward to manufacture, requiring skilled craftsmen and special detonators that were slow and expensive to make. In addition, Martin Hales was a hard-nosed businessman and inventor who protected each innovation in his designs by tightly drawn up patents resulting in difficulties and legal battles with the War Office when they wanted to expand production by recruiting new firms. This bickering delayed the official adoption of the Hales grenades until February 1915 and only about 130,000 were manufactured, mostly rifle grenades, before they were withdrawn from service in late 1915.

By the spring of 1915, with the troops becoming more familiar with the use of 'bombs' and trench fighting growing ever more intense, grenades were becoming an essential infantry weapon as can be seen from the estimates of grenade usage submitted by GHQ to the War Office.[20]

	Rifle grenades	**Hand grenades**	**Weekly total**
Dec. 1914	2,000	4,000	6,000
Jan. 1915	5,000	10,000	15,000
June 1915			42,000
July 1915			700,000

The significant increase in the estimates seen from the spring of 1915 onwards arose from the decision to train all infantrymen, not just bombers, in the use of grenades, and the need to equip and train Kitchener's New Armies.

In the opening weeks of 1915, Sir John French, dissatisfied with the erratic delivery of small numbers of grenades, informed the War Office that something cheaper and simpler than the No.1 would meet his needs and proposed copying the French spherical grenade, a suggestion rejected by the Ordnance Board on the grounds that the French grenade was dangerous to the thrower! An alternative suggestion for a ball grenade made by the Chief Superintendent of Ordnance Factories floundered as the Ordnance Board could not agree on a design.

In the end Sir John's urgent demands for grenades were to be met by the Royal Engineers, who started a cottage industry manufacturing grenades from whatever materials came to hand. This resulted in the famous jam-tin grenades, which consisted of a suitable container filled with pieces of metal surrounding a small bag of explosive into which was jammed a detonator, in turn attached to about 5 inches of Bickford safety fuse sticking through the lid. The fuse was lit with a match or a glowing cigarette and the grenade thrown at the enemy.

Contrary to popular belief these grenades were not manufactured by the infantry, wiling away their time in the trenches, but were produced in workshops under the

20 *History of the Ministry of Munitions. Vol. XI. Part 1 Trench Warfare* Supplies, p.73.

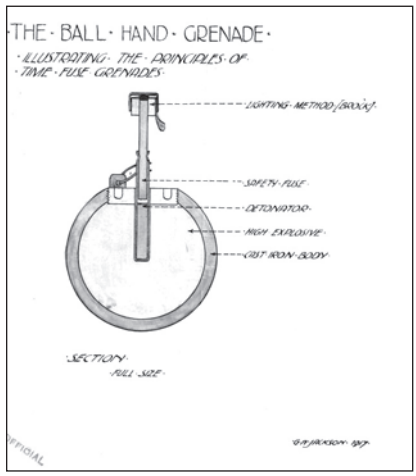
control of the RE Field Companies attached to each division. One of the most detailed accounts of these early bomb factories comes from the Sappers and Miners of the Lahore Division of the Indian Corps. They set up their workshops behind the lines close to Festubert and, with the help of their French interpreters, set up a supply chain purchasing the raw materials they needed from Bethune and the surrounding mining district. They employed a mixed labour force of French civilians and soldiers from their attached Black Watch battalion who had craft skills. By November 1914 they were producing 400 grenades a day, both jam-tin and hair-brush varieties, as well as mortars and mortar ammunition.

It was the development of these workshops that was to change Jackson's department from one supplying obscure engineering kit to one that would, by the end of 1915, supply the majority of specialised infantry weapons required for trench fighting. The growth of bomb-making factories naturally stimulated a demand for explosives and by late November Jackson was supplying such large quantities to the Field Companies that he began to encroach upon supplies required for artillery shells. This led to a confrontation with the Directorate of Artillery that threatened to limit his supplies and Jackson set about finding an alternative by testing civilian explosives, ultimately finding one that was suitable for military use in the form of a mining and quarrying explosive called Ammonal. Jackson's introduction of ammonium nitrate explosives for military use probably represents his greatest contribution to the war effort, for Britain could not have produced the millions of grenades, mortar bombs, and HE shell required to defeat the Imperial German Army without this cheap chemical as an essential component of the explosive fill.

Grenade Design

It is probable that questions arising from the supply of explosives led, in late 1914, to the discussion between Major-General von Donop and Jackson on the problems associated with the extemporised grenades produced in France. The outcome was that Jackson was given permission to develop a safer grenade, a decision that marked the beginning of the transformation of FW3A into the TWD.

This transition process was assisted by two unintended consequences of decisions made by von Donop. Jackson was a Royal Engineer officer, and as such had no authority to develop munitions, which were the prerogative of the Directorate of Artillery. But von Donop's decision allowed Jackson to side-step the Directorate and thus freed him from the War Office bureaucracy associated with the Ordnance Board and Army Council. This was invaluable, for it allowed the TWD to rapidly introduce modifications and innovative designs that significantly shortened the period between innovation and use on the battlefield. Secondly, in order to supply the Field Companies with non-standardised items of equipment Jackson had been authorised to deal with companies not on the War Office approved list of suppliers, and he now used this freedom to build up his munitions manufacturing activities.


THE · BALL · HAND · GRENADE ·
· ILLUSTRATING · THE · PRINCIPLES · OF ·
· TIME · FUSE · GRENADES ·
· LIGHTING · METHOD (BROCK) ·
· SAFETY · FUSE ·
· DETONATOR ·
· HIGH · EXPLOSIVE ·
· CAST · IRON · BODY ·
· SECTION ·
· FULL · SIZE ·

A diagram of the No.15 Ball Grenade. The need to physically light the fuse before throwing proved a serious drawback. (Author's collection)

To manufacture his grenade Jackson turned to the Roburite and Ammonal Company, whose major product was mining explosives made from a thin tube of soldered tin filled with ammonal that could be pushed into the drill holes produced in mines or quarries. Jackson asked the company to adapt this process to extrude two cylinders, one 3 inches in diameter, and a smaller one 1½ inches in diameter that fitted inside the larger. The space between the two cylinders was filled by shrapnel balls embedded in resin and the smaller tin filled with ammonal in which was embedded a detonator attached to a short length of Bickford fuse terminating in a friction igniter. An important feature of these grenades was they employed non-military detonators that were cheap to make, available in bulk and did not compete with conventional munitions production. Jackson's grenades were adopted by the War Office as the No.8 double-cylinder, with the heavier No.9 for use with catapults, and thousands were manufactured before being superseded by the No.6 and Ball grenades in the middle of 1915.

During the first four months of 1915 Jackson appears to have developed about a dozen different types of hand grenade. Most did not reach the troops as they were swiftly superseded by improved designs before they went into production. Even then there were failures. In April 1915 the ill-fated Pitcher grenade was introduced with tens of thousands issued by the middle of 1915, yet by the end of the year this grenade had to be withdrawn as accidents were so common that the bombers trained in its use were referred to as "The Suicide Club".[21] The Pitcher was followed by the slightly more successful Ball and Oval grenades which resembled each other in design, but not in shape, each consisting of a cast-iron body filled with ammonal into which was screwed a plug with the sleeve to take the detonator fired by means of a Nobel friction igniter.

21 *History of the Ministry of Munitions. Vol. XI. Part 1 Trench Warfare Supplies*, p.77.

The saga of the No.15 Ball grenade is an example of the "painful and weary stages" on the road to supplying the army with the munitions it needed. In May 1915 Sir John French informed the War Office that he would adopt the Mills bomb as the army's standard hand grenade and that all others should be phased out as the Mills became available, but in the meantime any type available should be sent out in as large quantities as possible. Unfortunately production difficulties delayed the introduction of the Mills. By default the No.15 became the standard grenade for the Battle of Loos with 200,000 per week being produced in August, rising to 500,000 by the middle of November. This high level of production was to introduce a fatal flaw. As mentioned above detonators were ignited by means of a Nobel igniter, but at this level of production Nobel were incapable of producing the quantity required and the decision was made to fit the grenades with the Bickford fuse. These were extremely sensitive to damp and were to fail completely in the wet weather that characterised the opening days of the Battle of Loos. Although they were later re-issued, fitted again with the Nobel igniter, the troops had lost confidence in this grenade and it was withdrawn from service towards the end of the battle as the No.5 Mills became available. Several million Ball grenades, now redundant, were sent to Russia.

To-day there is a widespread tendency to dismiss these extemporised grenades as ineffectual and amateur, but this is a judgement based on hindsight. The end users were aware of their limitations and assiduously investigated accidents in training in order to learn from mistakes and improve design. The Ball and Oval were practical enough for the type of trench fighting that characterised most of 1915 and their importance in establishing the role of grenades in the evolving tactics of trench warfare can be seen in the large numbers supplied to the BEF during the second half of 1915.

The Production of Grenades in the second half of 1915:[22]

	3rd Quarter	**4th Quarter**
No 1 Percussion	113,324	103,515
Pitcher (No 13 & 14)	121,624	10,008
Ball (No 15)	1,670,332	4,237,188
Oval (No 16)	11,000	603,964
Mills (No 5)	292,396	4,536,090
Rifle	29,600	191,070
Smoke	116,800	180,451
Totals	2,355,276	9,861,291[23]

22 *History of the Ministry of Munitions. Vol. XI. Part 1 Trench Warfare Supplies,* p.134.

23 These are the grenades manufactured under Ministry of Munitions contracts after June 1915 and excluded those manufactured under FW3A contracts before that date, and the output of the Army Workshops in France and Gallipoli.

By late 1915 all of these grenades were being superseded by the Mills. This grenade, originally of Belgian design but greatly improved by William Mills, a golf-club manufacturer from Sunderland, was submitted to the War Office in January 1915 and immediately accepted. The developmental work, under the control of the Directorate of Artillery, was completed by April and tenders were put out to manufacture 150,000 for testing and evaluation. By July, when responsibility for the grenade passed to the TWD, 16,000 of those had had been delivered to the bombing schools and based on the experience of their use it was decided to place orders for the first 1,000,000. This order may be used as an illustration of how the TWD organised its production.

As mentioned previously the unique manufacturing practices of the TWD involved contracting hundreds of small companies to produce the components that were to be assembled into the completed munitions. The production of the Mills grenade body was a comparatively simple task that could be carried out by any firm that had a furnace capable of melting iron, but to produce the millions required contracts had to be placed with over 200 companies, including textile machinery makers, motor engineers, and bicycle makers, as well as makers of bedsteads, gas meters, fire fenders, and all kinds of domestic fittings. The finer work on the smaller parts of the grenade was undertaken by an equally diverse range of firms including dental instrument makers, watch makers, manufacturers of nuts, bolts and locks, toys and even the manufacturers of fishing tackle. The filling was undertaken by a consortium formed from the smaller firework manufacturers of West Yorkshire, who had lost their trade due to the wartime ban on firework displays.

Unfortunately production delays, and the rectification of minor faults, delayed the introduction of the Mills in large numbers until November 1915, but once it was available all extemporised grenades were withdrawn from service except the special grenades, such as smoke and chemical. The other exception was rifle grenades where home production could not keep up with demand. To meet the shortfall Captain Newton developed the Newton Pippin rifle grenade. About 3 million of these were manufactured in the Second Army workshops at Hazebrouck. However, even this did not satisfy demand and the TWD started home production of the Newton Pippin in March 1916.

Mortars

Sir John French first wrote to the War Office on 20 October 1914 requesting a supply of trench mortars specifying that they should be mobile, accurate at short range and capable of firing a large high explosive shell. In case the War Office missed the point he attached a pamphlet on the German *minenwerfer* and drew their attention to the details of the Krupp Trench Howitzer published in the Journal of the Royal Artillery that very week. The request was forwarded to the Superintendent of the Royal Ordnance Factories at Woolwich, but he had no wish to contemplate any new munitions development for, in keeping with the established doctrine that the

army was expected to fight the war with the munitions and equipment in place, he had closed the Woolwich research facilities and transferred them over to production! Furthermore Sir John's letter seemed to be requesting something akin to the *minenwerfer* and diverting resources into the manufacture of such a sophisticated weapon would seriously disrupt the production of field guns, for which, as we have seen, there was already a massive demand. The Royal Ordnance Factory, having declined to get into the mortar manufacturing business, asked its civilian partners to submit suggestions and, sensing an opportunity to re-cycle old stock, Elswick offered a conversion of their obsolete 5-inch BL howitzer, and Vickers a conversion of their 75mm howitzer. GHQ rejected both as too heavy and large for use in the trenches.

The initiative for the development of a light trench mortar for the BEF lies with the Indian Corps. In a War Diary entry dated 12 November 1914 the 4th Field Company, 1st King George's Sappers and Miners, recorded the completion of their first "bomb gun". They completed a second two days later. Subsequent entries record the development of ammunition and practice shoots; the honour of firing the first shot in anger goes to Lieutenant Robson RE, who successfully destroyed a particularly annoying enemy sap, much to the delight of the infantry. Further field trials led to modifications in design and the improved weapon was demonstrated to General Sir James Willcocks, GOC Indian Corps on 21 November, with a follow up demonstration on 28 November at Army HQ for senior British and French staff officers.

An early adopter of this new technology was Lieutenant-General Sir Douglas Haig who visited the mortar workshop on 12 December, noting with satisfaction that each of his divisions were now equipped with four mortars and about one hundred rounds of ammunition. When informed that neither II nor III Corps had started to make mortars he instructed that each be sent four, remarking smugly in his diary "they seemed rather slovenly in their methods of carrying on war".[24]

When first introduced grenades and mortars were considered "engineering stores" to be called upon when needed and employed in action by trained sappers but, as their use became more prevalent, it was decided to train selective infantry to operate them. The Indian Corps were the trail blazers once more. From the middle of November the 3rd and 4th Field Companies began training infantry in the use of grenades and, on 1 December, 8 men from the 2nd Battalion the Leicestershire Regiment (Garhwal Brigade) were attached to the 4th Field Company for instruction in the use of the "bomb gun".[25]

By the spring of 1915 small numbers of the Indian pattern mortars had spread throughout the BEF, each firing a bomb based upon the jam-tin grenade weighing about 4½ lbs, filled with high explosive, and detonated by means of a length of

24 Gary Sheffield & John Bourne (Eds), *Douglas Haig. War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*. (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson 2005) p.84.

25 TNA: WO 95/3938/2, War Diary, Meerut Division, RE 4th Field Coy Sappers & Miners, 11th November 1914.

Bickford fuse ignited by the explosion of the propellant. Firing the weapon was a rather dangerous procedure as 'prematures' were common, this being due to the unpredictability of exactly where, along its length, the fuse would ignite. A second source of extemporised mortars became available in May 1915 when Captain Henry Newton, an extremely inventive engineer serving with the 5th Battalion Sherwood Foresters, took over the abandoned engineering workshops in the École Nationale in Armentiéres to form the Second Army workshops. Here he made a mortar cast from brass that had a wider traverse and greater accuracy than the Indian pattern "pipe gun".[26]

The Search for Approved Service Patterns

Following the failure of the Elswick and Vickers to provide British equivalents of the *minenwerfer*, the Royal Ordnance Factory returned to the question of mortar design. Ultimately they produced a light 4-inch model, improvised by boring out a 6-inch naval shell, and in December a dozen of these little mortars, with 540 rounds of ammunition, had been sent out to France. The figure would rise to 40 mortars with 3,000 rounds of ammunition by June 1915. In late December 1914 the Royal Ordnance Factories also commenced the manufacture of the Indian pattern mortar sending the first 12, with 1000 rounds of ammunition, to France in January 1915. Eight of them burst within 10 days and by trial and error it was determined that this stemmed from moisture in the barrel; prematures were noticeably reduced if the barrel was fitted with a canvas cover when not in use. The Royal Ordnance Factory went on to make a further 120 of these mortars, 20 of which were sent to the Dardanelles, the rest to France. Unfortunately, in a disastrous attempt to improve ammunition supply the War Office placed a contract for 100,000 bombs with a single supplier who proved incapable of completing the work, leaving the mortars extremely short of ammunition until the end of May. The 3-inch Stokes superseded these improvised mortars in early 1916.

The most successful of the early mortars was the 2-inch "Woolwich" medium mortar based upon a Krupp design. The Krupp engineers had produced a relatively small mortar capable of firing a large bomb by the ingenious device of attaching a steel rod onto a spherical bomb which was inserted into the 2-inch barrel of the mortar, the bomb remaining outside, hence the nickname "toffee-apple" given to the bomb by the troops. The first British modification of this mortar, designed to get around the Krupp patents, was the 1.57-inch Vickers firing a bomb weighing either 18 or 32 pounds. The trial versions were sent to France for testing in March 1915 where GHQ assessed them as "good mortars and fairly effective, but one of the bombs was too light and the other a limited range of 200 yards".[27] Nevertheless they ordered 150 mortars with 50

26 Newton's workshop would remain a major supplier of mortars and ammunition until late 1916.

27 *History of the Ministry of Munitions. Vol. XI The Supply of Munitions Part* 1. *Trench Warfare Supplies*, p.35.

rounds per weapon. The Royal Ordnance Factory's variation on the Krupp design had a calibre of 2-inch and fired a 51-pound shell containing 12.5 pounds ammonal with a maximum range of 600 yards.

A step change in mortar design and production occurred when responsibility was transferred to the TWD in July 1915. The service mortars in use at that time were the 4-inch light mortar, the 3.7-inch pipe gun, and the 2-inch medium, all produced by the Royal Ordnance Factories, and the Vickers 1.57-inch produced by the company of the same name. In addition there were the Newton, and other light mortars, produced by the Army Workshops in France. All had significant defects in design and, except for the Woolwich 2-inch, were short of both range and hitting power due to limited HE payloads.

The first of the service mortars to be overhauled by the TWD was the Woolwich 2-inch. When Lieutenant Frank Sutton was appointed head of the mortar section he was appalled to find that, after completion of the initial order of 25 weapons, no more had been made. The Woolwich staff maintained that there was no point for they could not meet the ammunition requirements for the 25 already issued as munitions grade steel for the bomb casings and the No.80 fuse were in short supply. Both were essential for the manufacture of the 18-pounder shrapnel shell and this was given priority over the new fangled mortar bomb.

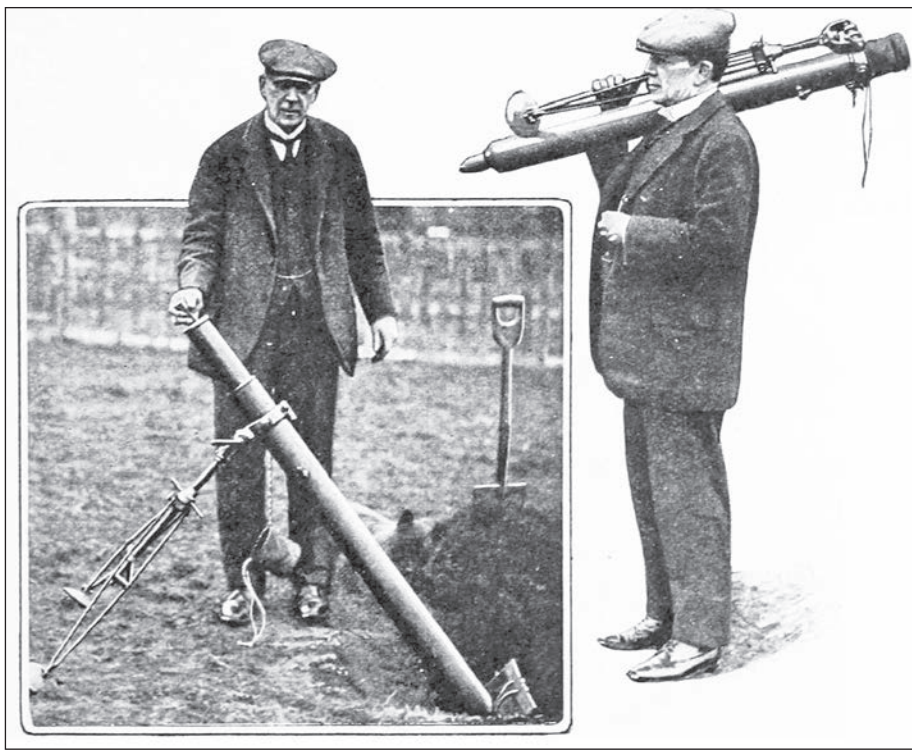
Lieutenant Sutton quickly established that cast iron could be used for the bomb casing, which would allow them to be manufactured in their hundreds by any small foundry. The fuse problem was partially overcome by using any fuse that was available in excess and by a graze fuse invented by Sutton, although design modifications delayed its mass production until early 1916. These, and modifications to the design of the gun so it could be manufactured using small firms with a semi-skilled workforce, ensured that there would be sufficient 2-inch mortars, with ammunition, to play a significant role in the Somme battles the following year.

On 14 August 1915 Lieutenant Sutton placed his first orders for 140,000 cast iron bomb casings, increased to 500,000 in September, to be delivered at a rate of 50,000 a week commencing 18 September. However all was not well. The Woolwich specification for the original bombs required that the rod attached to the bomb be made from high specification cold drawn steel tube. This type of tubing was in high demand in other essential industries and the manufacturer could not meet the increased demand stimulated by Sutton's orders for bomb casings. Therefore, the TWD substituted lower specification hot drawn tubing, but this was rejected by Colonel Vandeleur, Chief Inspector, Woolwich who insisted on the original specification, forcing the TWD to spend several weeks developing a new tube that would meet the specification. Then on 11 November Colonel Vandeleur reversed his decision stating that he would accept stems at the lower specification! This little farce ensured that Haig's First Army would be chronically short of essential medium mortars during the Battle of Loos.

After assuming the responsibility for mortars Jackson sent Lieutenant-Colonel Matteson to Woolwich to review any research being carried out on potential trench warfare weapons. Here he found the drawings and test results of the unsuccessful trials

carried out on Wilfred Stokes' Mortar. Unlike the Ordnance Board, Matteson was impressed by the weapon's performance and also the potential for the mass production of such a simple device, and arrangements were made for Stokes to demonstrate his mortar to Jackson. The latter was duly impressed and recommended that it should be demonstrated to Lloyd George who, equally impressed, instructed Jackson to produce 1000 mortars and 100,000 bombs as soon as possible. Unfortunately production difficulties with the tube and a series of technical problems with the ammunition delayed the introduction of the mortar, and only 304 had been issued to the army by the end of 1915, with 200 of those allocated to the training schools. The Stokes Mortar is a classic example of the *modus operandi* of the TWD. The department did not invent the Stokes mortar, or adopt it because it was a superior weapon, which it was not. Rather it filled the need for a light mortar and Wilfred Stokes was presenting them with a design, which aside from the tube, could be manufactured by any small engineering company with basic equipment and staff of average ability. Stokes' invention of his unique bomb was an added bonus.

Lloyd George was also responsible for foisting the heavy mortar on the BEF. In September 1915 he borrowed the drawings of the French 240mm heavy mortar



Wilfred Stokes demonstrating his trench mortar. (Editor's collection)

from Albert Thomas, the French Minister of Munitions, and sent them to Jackson for comment. When Jackson reported favourably on the mortar two members of his department were sent to France to study the manufacturing process and bring back samples, which arrived in England on 29 October. GHQ agreed that copying this mortar was the quickest way to equip the army. The TWD set the process in motion but soon plunged into a sea of problems.

Firstly the mortar could not be copied using the French manufacturing methods as their techniques were unknown in England, so new engineering process had to be worked out. Next the Woolwich inspectorate analysed the steel in the French examples and put this into the specification. Unfortunately no British smelter produced this exact specification and several months were lost in failed attempts to replicate the carbon content in the French steel despite pleas from the TWD that they had a letter from the French manufacturer stating that any steel suitable for gun barrels could be used to make the mortar tubes. Then there were the bombs; the French bombs had fins attached but British manufacturers did not have the welding skills to securely attach fins to the bomb casing and several weeks went by before French workers could be brought over to train British welders in the necessary techniques of electric welding. With these, and other minor delays, it was the third week of June 1916 before the first 30 British 9.45-inch heavy mortars, evolved with much difficulty from the French 240mm, were sent to France.

Summary

By the end of 1915 Britain had started to mobilise and develop her industry and harness the innate inventiveness of her scientists and engineers. The Ministry of Munitions' gun programme was beginning to provide the weapons required to dominate the great battles that marked the remaining years of war, and most of the technical problems in shell production had been overcome. The Trench Warfare Department were producing an effective grenade and a light, medium and heavy mortar, each appropriate to its task in the tactical mix, as well as other items of equipment such as the Brodie helmet. Much had yet to come to fruition, such as the tank, aircraft technology and improvements in chemical warfare, but the pathways to their achievement were relatively clear.

It is striking to contrast this with what had gone before. It is impossible to understand the outcomes of the battles of Neuve Chapelle, Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Loos without knowledge of the limitations imposed upon the troops by the availability, or non-availability, of appropriate munitions. The tragedy for the British Army on the Western Front in 1915 was that it was required to fight a vicious, increasingly industrialised trench war against a well-equipped enemy occupying superior ground with weapons that were in short supply, frequently improvised and often inadequate. It is by studying the factors that influenced munitions production during that critical year that we move closer to understanding the painful and weary stages that led to final victory.

3

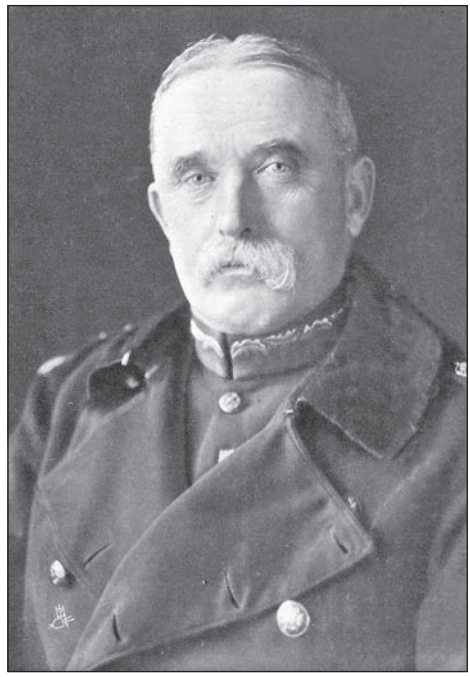
Friends Disunited: Johnnie French, Wully Robertson and 'K of K' in 1915

John Spencer

At the close of 1915, after 18 months of war with little gained except spiraling casualties, the British government sacked the BEF's Commander-in-Chief. Field Marshal Sir John French, dashing cavalry officer and hero of the Boer War sailed home in ignominy; a disappointment to his political masters and abandoned by his military colleagues. However, instead of stepping onto the boat back to England with him to share a bitter exile, his right-hand man was promoted. It might have been expected that Sir William "Wully" Robertson, as Chief of Staff to French for the past year would have shared his ignominy too. In fact the opposite was true. Robertson found himself elevated to the role of Chief of the Imperial General Staff at the War Office in Whitehall and would serve as the government's principal military advisor.

Why, if French had been such a failure, was his closest colleague seen as the ideal individual to counsel the Prime Minister and his Cabinet on how the war should be fought and won? As this essay will reveal, while Robertson and French worked efficiently together initially, intellectually and professionally they were poles apart. 1915 was to prove that French, although possessing great personal courage, lacked the military vision needed to fight war on an industrial scale. Robertson, a master of detail and process, was in some respects the ideal counterweight to his mercurial chief. Together they shared the frustrations of a year in which the British Army played second fiddle to its principal ally and endured a series of costly disappointments. This chapter will examine the French-Robertson partnership at both the operational and strategic level, and consider why, from promising beginnings, it deteriorated to the point at which Robertson played a significant role in his chief's professional demise. Just as important was the relationship both men had with Lord Kitchener of Khartoum, Secretary of State for War and effectively their direct political master. A friendship between Johnnie French and 'K of K', forged on the battlefields of the Boer War, quickly soured under the stresses of modern warfare and the two clashed repeatedly and in a way in which, as we shall see, directly impacted on the conduct of the war on the Western Front. Robertson took a different approach and ended 1915 the effective master of the

once all-powerful soldier-statesman. While Robertson's reputation and influence rose, Sir John's fell. The former flourished under the demands of 20th century warfare while the latter became one of its many hapless victims.



Sir John French. (Editor's collection)

While French's actions in 1915 have been the subject of considerable study, details of Robertson's role in this period are less well known. Looking at the historiography, Robertson appears to have risen without trace to one of the most senior positions in the British military-political establishment. In fact, his ascendancy at the end of the 1915 was the result of years of hard work and intelligent positioning; to adapt an appellation from a biography of one of his contemporaries, Robertson was one of the Great War's "educated soldiers".[1]

For Robertson, 1915 would prove to be a year of immense frustration. He chafed against the constraints of coalition warfare throughout the year. At the same time, he became exasperated with his C-in-C's failure to convince their political masters of the rightness of a military strategy founded on defeating Germany on the Western Front. For Robertson this failing was made worse by French's apparent inability to make firm, clear decisions and stick to them. Whilst his chief vacillated, Robertson spent the year harrying and chiding his colleagues of the General Staff at the War Office over the shortage of materiel, particularly high explosive artillery ammunition, a resource he increasingly viewed as essential in breaking the stalemate of trench warfare.

More significantly for his future career, and for Britain's Great War strategy, Robertson began a campaign to re-establish the authority of the General Staff in Whitehall. Contemptuous of the politicians and bureaucrats who meddled in war policy, he lobbied to strengthen the arm of the government's military advisors against the 'armchair strategists' he felt were distracting and diluting the military effort. Robertson, along with the vast majority of his military colleagues, was convinced that the war could only be won by defeating the principal enemy, Germany, in the principal theatre, the Western Front. The War Office's failure to convince the government

1 John Terraine, *Douglas Haig: The Educated Soldier*, (London: Cassell, 1963).

of what in his eyes was a self-evident truth would lead to the costly 'sideshows' of Gallipoli and Salonika.

Yet all this lay in the future. When Robertson became the BEF's CGS on 25 January 1915 his responsibilities were clear. As he recorded in his memoirs, he was the C-in-C's "responsible adviser on all matters affecting military operations, through whom he exercises his functions of command, and by whom all orders issued by him will be signed".[2] In 1915 staff duties at GHQ saw officers of equal rank in a triumvirate of CGS, Quartermaster-General (QMG) and Adjutant General (AG). Robertson's new role "was in fact first amongst equals, and it was he who was presumed to have most influence over and contact with the C-in-C".[3]

Robertson had misgivings about becoming CGS and worried about how he might get on with his chief. According to Sir Henry Wilson, both he and Robertson believed they were being considered for the post, but neither claimed to want it, "the chance of a lifetime and two men in a car both refusing it".[4] Robertson's doubts were amplified by the fact that he knew that Sir John had wanted to appoint Wilson, his long-time friend and confidant, and he disliked being second choice.[5] At the same time he was reluctant to give up his role as QMG, one at which he had excelled.[6]

Nonetheless, Robertson took the post. Initially at least, he and French seemed to have worked together satisfactorily, despite their fundamentally different backgrounds and personalities. French, like most British army officers of the period, was a product of a prosperous upper-class background.[7] Robertson was the son of the local postmaster and jobbing tailor from Welbourne in Lincolnshire.[8] French went to Harrow, Robertson to the village school. While Robertson began his working life as a domestic servant, Sir John first joined the Royal Navy and later the army as a subaltern in the 8th (Queen's Royal Irish) Hussars. Robertson soon found his way into uniform, as a trooper in the 16th (The Queen's) Lancers and slowly but surely began his ascent up the ranks. It was a climb which would end with him raised to Field Marshal; a century later this achievement remains unique in the history of the British Army. Intellectually the two differed profoundly. According to George

2 Sir William Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal*, (London: Constable, 1921) p. 219.
3 Dan Todman, 'The Grand Lamasery Revisited: General Headquarters on the Western Front 1914-1918' in Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman, (eds.) *Command and Control on the Western Front: the British Army's Experience,* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2007 [2004]), p. 41.
4 Imperial War Museum (hereafter IWM), Wilson Papers, Wilson Diary, 17 January 1915.
5 Robertson, *Private to Field Marshal*, p. 218.
6 For a discussion on Robertson's role in the first months of the war see John Spencer, 'Sir William Robertson as Quartermaster General', in Spencer Jones (ed.), *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914*, (Solihull: Helion, 2013), pp. 89-108.
7 George H. Cassar, *The Tragedy of Sir John French*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985) p. 19-21.
8 David R. Woodward, *Field Marshal Sir William Robertson: Chief of the Imperial General Staff in the Great War*, (Westport: Praeger, 1998), p. 1.

Cassar: "It cannot be claimed that French was a well-rounded soldier or that he stood out as an intellectual giant in the military world", and in mid-life he lost his erstwhile interest in developments in his profession.[9] Robertson, unlike French, was able to boast the coveted letters "psc" to indicate he had "passed the Staff College" examinations. According to his latest biographer some contemporaries saw him as "the cleverest man in the army".[10]

Despite these contrasting characteristics, there is little if any evidence of major differences of principle between the two men on the key issues facing the BEF and the British Army as a whole. Immediately on his appointment it was clear to his colleagues that Robertson was to be a more effective CGS than his predecessor, the reticent Sir Archibald Murray, whose orders were "miracles of opacity, devoid of context, and a source of consternation and confusion to those who received them".[11] On 5 February Sir Douglas Haig, commanding First Army, met with Robertson and wrote: "In talking to him, one gets a great feeling of confidence in what he takes in hand."[12] Days later Haig attended a briefing by the C-in-C about the forthcoming attack on Neuve Chapelle: "I thought the way in which the matter in hand was dealt with seems to show that Robertson has the full confidence of Sir John and augers well for the future".[13] Lord Esher, without official portfolio but entrusted by the government with various important missions, visited GHQ soon after Robertson took up his new role and reported to Sir Maurice Hankey, Secretary to both the Cabinet and War Council:

> You cannot imagine how smoothly all the preparation for this attack on La Bassee [part of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle] worked under the new Chief of Staff. I am telling you Sir John's impressions. He likes Robertson's methods. French gives his general instructions. Robertson comes in with a few questions on half a sheet of note paper. They are answered, and everything goes forward.[14]

This methodology appears to have continued for the rest of the year with Robertson interpreting his chief's wishes to the army. However, the apparently smooth process disguised the fact that Robertson was struggling with a superior who was increasingly at odds with Whitehall.

One of the fundamentals on which French and Robertson agreed was that the war could only be won by defeating Germany on the Western Front. In this they

9 Cassar, *Sir John French*, p. 66.
10 Woodward, *Sir William Robertson*, pp. 1-5.
11 J.M. Bourne, *Britain and the Great War 1914-1918* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), p. 27.
12 The National Archives, (hereafter TNA), WO 256/3, Haig Papers, Haig Diary, 5 February 1915.
13 TNA: WO 256/3, Haig Papers, Haig Diary, 14 February 1915.
14 Churchill Archives Centre (hereafter CAC), Hankey Papers, (HNKY 4/7), Esher to Hankey, ?? March 1915 (precise date obscured by hole punch in original notepaper).

had the support of other senior officers including Haig, Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, commanding Second Army, and Sir Henry Wilson, then serving as senior liaison officer with the French Army.

A bewildering array of factors faced Britain's military and political decision-makers at the beginning of 1915. War on the Western Front had reached deadlock with trenches replacing the war of movement that had characterised the late summer and early autumn of 1914. Germany was apparently on the defensive in the west, but Britain's main ally was determined to evict the invader from French soil.[15] As the year progressed, attempts by France and Britain to end the stalemate and drive back the Germans grew in scale, both in resources employed and casualties suffered. The handful of divisions of the British Army that went to France in 1914 had been badly mauled in the defensive battles of that year. By the time Robertson became CGS the pre-war army's professional core, particularly its officer and NCO cadres, was much diminished. By spring 1915 the original BEF "officers as well as men, had been for all practical purposes annihilated".[16]

For the BEF, 1915 was marked by shortage of manpower while Britain trained its 'New Armies' at home.[17] At the start of the year French called on Kitchener to commit these in piecemeal fashion to leaven the hard-pressed Regular divisions that had been so badly mauled the previous year. The Secretary of State was deaf to such pleas, determined to release these forces as whole divisions and corps. It was one of many causes of friction between the two men.[18] Robertson noted:

> It is simply impossible to make a new army in the course of a year. The organisation fails in officers and non-commissioned officers … the troops have no confidence in themselves nor in their leaders. If we had enough regular officers and non-commissioned officers to man the New Armies they would be very good, but as all join practically on the same day no subordinate credits his superior with knowing much more about the business than he knows himself, and consequently in times of stress he prefers to act according to the dictates of his own judgement rather than in accordance with the orders of his appointed superiors.[19]

15 Edmonds, Sir James, E., & Wynn, Capt. G.C., *History of the Great War Based on Official Documents, Military Operations France and Belgium 1915* Vols I & II (1927 and 1928; Reprinted: Uckfield: Naval & Military Press) *(Vol i)*, p. 3.

16 Brian Bond, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College, 1854-1914*, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), p. 305.

17 Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: the Raising of the New Armies*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988).

18 Richard Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal: A Life of Sir John French* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981) p. 262.

19 Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (hereafter LHCMA), Robertson Papers, (7/1/18). Robertson to Lieutenant Colonel Arthur John Bigge, Baron Stamfordham, Private Secretary to HM King George V, 1 October 1915.

Troops were not the only resource in short supply. Lack of artillery, particularly heavy guns and high explosive ammunition, hampered offensive planning and meant that attacks, when they came, were quickly curtailed. In fact by the close of 1914 Sir John had recognised the essential nature of large concentrations of artillery in providing the conditions for a successful offensive.[20] In this respect, the BEF's process of learning lessons and drawing operational and tactical conclusions from them can be identified as having begun in the winter of 1914. GHQ's demands for more shells and guns was a familiar refrain throughout 1915 and beyond. Encouraged by aspects of the battles of Neuve Chapelle and Festubert, Robertson wrote to Major General C.E. Callwell, Director of Military Operations and Intelligence at the War Office (DMO): "We know that we can break the front line because we have already done it on two occasions but then we have had to stop for want of ammunition!"[21] The CGS was not alone in this belief. His General Staff Officer 1 (GSO1), Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Maurice wrote optimistically after Neuve Chapelle:

> With a very little luck we should have had a very big success, but a mistake was made at an important moment on the first day, which delayed the reserves coming up and a dense fog on the morning of the 2nd day also kept us back for several hours, this just gave the Germans time to bring up their reserves, but for this I think we should have broken right through.[22]

It became a familiar refrain. In May, two days after the start of the Battle of Festubert, French advised the Army Council:

> Our experiences at Neuve Chapelle and again this week, and that of the French near Arras show clearly that it is possible to break through the enemy's defences, provided sufficient artillery ammunition of the proper nature is available and sufficient troops are resolutely employed.[23]

A week later, once these lessons had been digested, he told Kitchener it had become clear that:

> However strong the enemy's defences may be they can be captured if they are sufficiently bombarded and an adequate force of infantry is resolutely employed … the recent fighting between Festubert and Arras did draw in the whole of the

20 Cassar, *Sir John French*, p. 198.
21 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/2/23), Robertson to Callwell, 31 May 1915.
22 LHCMA, Maurice Papers, (3/1/4/115), Maurice Diary, 17 March 1915.
23 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (3/1/1), French to Army Council, 17 May 1915.

> enemy's available reserves, but we were unable to develop our full offensive power owing to lack of artillery ammunition.[24]

At this time Robertson concluded there were three phases to a battle against entrenched positions. The first was to "carry the trenches", for which a good supply of ammunition was essential. The next to "get through the defended localities", the risk being that these strongpoints could be reinforced and re-established if the advance was not pushed forward. Thirdly, sufficient infantry reserves and field artillery support was essential to "exploit the success gained in the first two phases". There would be no speedy conclusion, patience was required, as were essential tools:

> I do not think that people without the experience we have had sufficiently realise what modern warfare is like in a situation such as ours in which there are no flanks and therefore can be no manoeuvre until a hole right through the defence is made. There is no doubt in our minds that it could be made if the means were forthcoming.

The "means" were heavy guns and ammunition, and if these were not available "we had better get into our holes and stay there and see what the French can do".[25]

Robertson had correctly identified the problem. It would take the BEF until 1918 to have all the tools at its disposal to provide the solution. As Gary Sheffield has observed: "The battles of 1915 were defined by a race to learn and apply lessons. The British were to learn the hard way that generally the German army was able to improve its defences faster than they were able to improve their assault techniques".[26]

This chronic shortage of heavy guns and ammunition, especially high explosive shells, was a constant source of friction between GHQ and Whitehall. The soldiers believed more could be done if only the politicians and the War Office got a grip on munitions production. French was convinced he knew where the fault lay and complained to the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill: "We are getting on here *slowly* but *surely*. Ammunition is still the big bug bear. K[itchener] ought to be *shot*!"[27] Unfortunately for the British, "the move to a mass army in 1915, just as the economy began to gear itself up, removed productive labour from the workforce. This stifled the munitions industry just as it became clear that the War would require

24 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (3/1/2), French to Kitchener, 23 May 1915.
25 LHCMA, Robertson Papers (7/2/23), Robertson to Callwell, 31 May 1915.
26 Gary Sheffield, *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army*, (London: Aurum, 2011), p. 102.
27 CAC, Spencer Churchill Papers, (26/2), French to Churchill, (original italics), 4 May 1915.

massive quantities of heavy shell and high explosive … a shell shortage began to be seen soon after the BEF's arrival in France, and it augured ill for the future".[28]

As planning began for the offensive which was to become the Battle of Loos, Robertson summed up the bleak situation to the King's Private Secretary, Lord Stamfordham:

> We began the war without an army or the means of making one. We are still to a great extent without those means. (For the past three days we have received a total of three rounds for our three 15-inch howitzers. The Germans yesterday fired 47 rounds of this calibre at certain places merely as a joke). So we must expect to be in difficulties.[29]

While shortages were a constant headache for Sir John and his staff, an even greater set of challenges was thrown up by the fact that Britain was the junior partner in a coalition war. Sir John's relationship with his French colleagues started badly in August 1914 and remained fraught.[30] French had understood from the beginning that he had an independent command and that the BEF would never come under the authority of a foreign general.[31] Remarkably, the French C-in-C General Joseph Joffre spent 1915 believing otherwise and interpreted Sir John's independence of mind and actions as a maddening manifestation of *perfida Albion*.[32] Nonetheless, Robertson felt Sir John might have done more to co-operate:

> [He] has never really sincerely, and honestly concerted with the French, while they regard him as by no means a man of ability or a faithful friend, and therefore they do not confide in him. Joffre and he have never been a mile within the heart of each other.[33]

Each of the BEF's offensive battles in 1915 was conducted as an adjunct to much larger French attacks.[34] In every case GHQ had little choice of location or timing of

28 Ian M Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front 1914-1919* (Westport, Ct and London: Praeger 1998), p. 42.

29 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/1/4), Robertson to Lord Stamfordham, 23 June 1915.

30 Things began badly with Sir John's first meeting with the commander of the French 5th Army General Charles Lanrezac, and continued in negative vein. See esp. Holmes, *Little Field Marshal*, pp. 208-218.

31 The complete list of Kitchener's instructions to French can be found in Sir James E. Edmonds, *History of the Great War Based on Official Documents, Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1914*, Vol. I (London: Macmillan, 1922), pp. 499-500.

32 Holmes, *Little Field Marshal*, p. 202.

33 LHCMA, Robertson Papers (7/1/5), Robertson to Stamfordham, undated draft but apparently written between 23 June and 11 July 1915.

34 The BEF's main offensive battles of 1915: Neuve Chapelle, 10-13 March; Aubers Ridge, 9-10 May; Festubert, 15-25 May; Loos, 25 September-16 October. For a clear exposition

these encounters. After the bloody disappointments First Army's spring offensives, Sir Douglas Haig prepared to assault the mining area around the village of Loos, as part of the French Third Battle of Artois.[35] He had originally dismissed the proposal as "very difficult" but as the day of the offensive approached he became more hopeful.[36] Sir John French and his CGS were not as sanguine. Lieutenant-Colonel Sidney Clive, head of the British Mission at French Headquarters, the *Grand Quartier General* (GQG), recorded: "Saw CGS about the attack on Loos. He is evidently convinced that the place is too strong, and that we should not be helping the French by throwing away thousands of lives in knocking our heads against a brick wall".[37] Two days later he added:

> I did not gather that they [French and Robertson] wish to attack anywhere; and that the real reason underlying this objection to attacking as arranged … is that that they don't believe that the French are going to get through. This makes them jib at putting in a lot of divisions at a point where they see little chance of doing much good.[38]

Nonetheless, the attack went ahead. As the fight wore on Robertson vented his frustrations, damning the French as "most unbusinesslike people" with a staff "far inferior to ours".[39] By the end of October Robertson believed the time for allowing the French to call the operational tune was past:

> It is necessary we should get a more dominating control over matters … our stake is as great as the French stake; we have now a great Army in the field; our Navy is all-powerful; we are finding the greater part of the money; our General Staff is at least as competent as the French General Staff to show the way to victory; and therefore we ought to take a much greater share in the general planning of operations than we have taken hitherto … we ought not to allow ourselves again to be dragged aimlessly and hurriedly by the French into operations of which we disapprove – that is, unless we are to leave supreme control of the operations in French hands, and to do merely what they ask us to do.[40]

of the BEF's supportive role alongside the French in 1915 see Jonathan Krause, *Early Trench Tactics in the French Army: The Second Battle of Artois, May-June 1915*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

35 See esp. Nick Lloyd, *Loos 1915*, (Stroud: The History Press, 2008).

36 Haig Diary, 20 and 22 June, 1915, in Gary Sheffield and John Bourne (eds.), *Douglas Haig, War Diaries and Letters: 1914-1918*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), pp. 128-9.

37 LHCMA, Clive Papers, (2/2), Clive Diary, 26 July 1915.

38 LHCMA, Clive Papers, (2/2) Clive Diary, 28 July 1915.

39 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/1/8), Robertson to Stamfordham, 1 October 1915.

40 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (3/2/22), notes by Robertson on the conduct of the war, 31 October 1915, p. 4.

It would not be until 1916, with the French Army concentrating on defending Verdun, that the British Army would take the offensive lead.

In 1915 the apparent lack of progress in France and Flanders, together with growing losses, prompted British politicians and soldiers to look for other theatres where the impasse might be broken and the conflict brought to a speedy end. French and Robertson fought hard to maintain the primacy of the Western Front, believing that it was there and there alone that the German Army would be defeated. They were also acutely aware that British resources being expended elsewhere would gravely disappoint the French, who were undertaking the bulk of the fighting and incurring the vast majority of the casualties in the west. GHQ's case for reinforcement of the Western Front was undermined by the growing antipathy between Sir John and Kitchener. The politicians were aware of the tension between the two, a situation which only served to embolden those armchair strategists with views on how the war should be fought.

The BEF's three failed offensives in the first six months of the year, together with the high cost of the defensive Second Battle of Ypres in April and May, saw those in power casting around for another way to breach the deadlock. Not all thought the Western Front held the answer. A growing caucus of influential figures believed there must be a better solution than the "billy-goat tactics of western generals in butting away the strength of their armies against unbreakable walls … in a succession of sickening thuds".[41] This desire to find other ways to win the war, as strong in France as in Britain, led to two major campaigns in 1915, the first in the Dardanelles and the second at Salonika in Macedonia. Designed to deliver a knock-out blow to Germany's allies, their immediate effect was to divert men and supplies away from France and Flanders.[42] Those commanding the BEF were united in their opposition. Robertson took a leading role in this dissent, waging a relentless campaign both officially and unofficially to persuade the government to abandon the "sideshows".[43] It was not a struggle he would win easily. Evidence of the hunger for an alternative strategy came early in 1915 from Robertson's old friend Charles Callwell, (DMO) at the War Office who felt there was an opportunity for "more effective work" in the east and asked "is not Joffre perhaps a little unduly impressed with the idea that the western is the decisive theatre?"[44] Robertson responded with characteristic bluntness:

> There is only one way of ending this war satisfactorily and that is by putting our troops where they can kill the most Germans and by trusting to ourselves and

41 David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George,* (London: Odhams Press, 1938, two volume edition), p. 292.

42 Bourne, *Britain and the Great War,* esp. pp. 40-48.

43 'Although there were important lessons to be learnt from the Gallipoli campaign it was a futile and costly sideshow for all the combatants,' Peter Hart, *Gallipoli* (London: Profile Books, 2011) p. ix.

44 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/2/2), Callwell to Robertson, 4 February 1915.

> not to other people. We have never yet put our back into the war as a nation. We are looking around the world for people to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for us on the foolish impression that we have the affection of everybody![45]

Robertson remained on the offensive. The day after the Royal Navy began its attempt to force the Dardanelles he condemned the exercise as "a ridiculous farce" and lambasted the pre-war army reformer Lord Haldane as: "One of those people who think that this war can be settled in some other way than by fighting. There is only one way to settle it and that is by fighting out here".[46] A fortnight later Hankey dined with Robertson at GHQ: "Rather awkward at first as he [Robertson] wouldn't talk. Found he believed me responsible for naval bombardment of Dardanelles which I have always opposed."[47]

Robertson was not alone in his antipathy to the Dardanelles. Hankey also talked with Wilson who "abused Churchill and the Dardanelles expedition".[48] Their views on the upcoming land campaign in Turkey were communicated to 10 Downing Street and Prime Minister Herbert Asquith noted: "Hankey has just been in: very anxious about the Dardanelles, which he says Robertson describes as the stiffest operation anybody cd. undertake".[49] Regardless, the landings proceeded as planned. Eager to ensure the King was aware of his concerns Robertson wrote to Stamfordham: "We are at war with Germany, and if it can be proved that the dispatch of troops to the Dardanelles helps to defeat Germany then they should go there. If it cannot be proved then it is clearly wrong."[50]

Although energetic, his campaign had little tangible effect on the government. In some respects the rationale that drove those, including Kitchener, to not only seek but also persist with an alternative to the Western Front is understandable. The stakes were high: "What was (or may have been) at stake between May and August 1915 was not simply the future of the Gallipoli campaign, but nothing less than whether the Middle East should take precedence over the Western Front as the British Empire's main war effort."[51]

As if the demands of coalition warfare on an industrialised scale, compounded by a general lack of resources, were not enough, GHQ was saddled with another destructive and self-inflicted problem. Before the outbreak of war Sir John French and Lord Kitchener had been close colleagues and friends. In the first months

45 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/2/9), Robertson to Callwell, 22 February 1915.
46 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/2/15), Robertson to Callwell, 19 March 1915.
47 CAC, Hankey Diary, (HNKY 1/1), 2 April 1915.
48 CAC, Hankey Diary, (HNKY 1/1), 3 April 1915.
49 Asquith to Venetia Stanley, in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: Documents: Vol II, Part 1: July 1914-April 1915,* (London: Heineman, 1972) p. 775.
50 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/1/4), Robertson to Stamfordham, 23 June 1915.
51 Stephen Badsey, 'The August Offensives in British Imperial Grand Strategy', in Ashley Ekins (ed.), *A Ridge Too Far: Climax on Gallipoli* (Titirangi, NZ: Exisle 2013), p. 59.

Lord Kitchener of Khartoum.
(Editor's collection)

of the conflict a number of clumsily presented interventions in operational matters by Kitchener outraged the prickly C-in-C. French had been humiliated when Kitchener, in person and in Field-Marshal's uniform, over-ruled his plans to remove the BEF from the line at the beginning of September 1914.[52] In November, after the setbacks of First Ypres, Sir John was outraged when he heard from Wilson that Kitchener had told the French he was prepared to replace him with Sir Ian Hamilton.[53] Always ready to interpret any perceived slight as a deliberate insult, French unsurprisingly became convinced Kitchener was determined to undermine and eventually replace him. Soon after the costly May battles on the Aubers Ridge, French hit back and accused Kitchener of being responsible for a shortage of artillery ammunition. The sorry saga of the "Shell Scandal", which backfired on its originator and further damaged his reputation with sympathetic politicians, has been well chronicled.[54] Less attention has been paid to the corrosive effect this, the apotheosis of the French-Kitchener feud, had on decision-making at GHQ. Soon after the controversy burst upon Fleet Street and a news-hungry public, Haig wrote in his diary:

> I have always put in a word, when I get a chance, advising that we all, especially at this time should pull together, and think about nothing but beating the Enemy! I fear that such advice from me had no effect. The truth is that Sir J. is of a very jealous disposition.[55]

52 Holmes, *Little Field Marshal*, pp. 230-233.
53 Cassar, *Sir John French*, p. 175.
54 Peter Fraser, 'The British Shells Scandal of 1915' *Canadian Journal of History*, 18 (1) (1983) pp. 69-86; Holmes, *Little Field Marshal*, pp. 287-292.
55 Haig Diary, 26 May, 1915, in Sheffield and Bourne (eds.), *Haig, War Diaries*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), pp. 126-7.

For Robertson the issue became all-pervasive, impacting on decision-making and diluting GHQ's influence in London. He outlined his concerns in a lengthy note to Lord Stamfordham, King George V's Private Secretary:

> We do not do the best with what we have got because of the wretched personal factor which creeps in everywhere. I can honestly say that half my time is taken up in combating this disquieting intrusion. I believe Sir John is now in a sense trying not to annoy Lord K, but we need far more than that. The worst of it is that I suppose, the Government pays no heed to his opinion. He is a discredited nonentity, I take it. I hope it is not so. If they do not trust him they should replace him. If they do trust him, they ought to take his advice, or at any rate ask for it if they do not get it.[56]

As for his Chief's attitude to his political masters at home:

> He has never fully laid his opinions before the government. He has too much taken the stand of doing as he wishes and telling the government nothing. I have been concerned about this for a long time past. A few days ago I finally made up my mind that he should do these things, or I should resign as a protest:
>
> a) Ask Lord K to come out and get on better relations
> b) Establish more sincere and complete relations with the French
> c) Write a full and true account of the situation for the information of the Government.[57]

In the face of this ultimatum from his Chief of Staff, French apparently promised to work to improve the Kitchener relationship: "So far so good but I have no real hopes of much good coming of it all". Robertson ended asking for confidentiality but told Lord Stamfordham he was happy for him to use the letter "for the good of the cause". Frustrated though he was, Robertson made it his business to confer with the War Secretary during a visit to London:

> The talks you and I have had have proved most helpful and I am gratified to feel that we are so closely in accord. It would be beneficial I am sure if I could come over more frequently and see you, and so keep more in touch with you and the situation as seen in London.[58]

56 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/1/5), Robertson to Stamfordham, undated draft but apparently written between 23 June and 11 July 1915.
57 Ibid.
58 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (4/3/26), Robertson to Kitchener, 4 July 1915.

The ongoing ill-will between Kitchener and French so concerned the King that his Assistant Private Secretary, Lieutenant Colonel Clive Wigram, raised the subject with Robertson twice within a week. "HM is so anxious to establish cordial relations and good will between the War Office and GHQ". He had just accompanied his sovereign on a review of the Grand Fleet: "Oh! If we could only get the same feelings of comradeship and mutual service between the parts of the army abroad and at home".[59]

Robertson was clearly frustrated by French's suspicions of Kitchener combined with his erratic command-style. He reportedly complained to Wilson that although both he and Haig disagreed with elements of the Loos plan: "He was not going to say another word as Sir J chopped and changed every day and was quite hopeless".[60] The CGS continued his lobbying against the Dardanelles offensive: "Unless this enterprise is shortly stopped, the chances of our obtaining a reasonably successful issue to the war will be doubtful". He had tried to get the C-in-C to present his views to the government but:

> He declined to do so. He says, and I dare say quite correctly, that his views are already well known, and that it is a waste of time to repeat them … I had prepared for his assistance a short note on the situation, but he declined to read it.[61]

The relationship continued to deteriorate. Wilson recorded: "R[obertson] is very sick with Sir J, he cannot manage him, nor influence him … it seems to me that these two are drifting into a relationship which will become very difficult. R who first tried to run Sir J is now powerless and I think is trying to get rid of him."[62] On the eve of the Loos battle Wilson and Robertson met again to discuss French's leadership: "Robertson told me this morning that he can't get Sir J. to do anything. He won't even allow instructions to go out re the coming fight. He is not well".[63]

Robertson appeared to be in a no-win situation. A month earlier his role as a go-between for French and Kitchener had landed him in hot water with his chief. Wigram told Robertson: "HM hopes that the relations between the GS at GHQ and at the War Office are friendly and correct – their views should be identical as

59 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/1/6), Wigram to Robertson, 11 July 1915, original emphasis, see also LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/1/8), Wigram to Robertson, 16 July 1915.
60 IWM, Wilson Papers, Wilson Diary, 29 July 1915.
61 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/1/10), Robertson to Wigram, 6 August 1915. Nonetheless, Robertson enclosed a copy of the note to Wigram in the full knowledge that it would be seen by the King.
62 IWM, Wilson Papers, Wilson Diary, 12 August 1915.
63 IWM, Wilson Papers, Wilson Diary, 13 September 1915.

far as possible".[64] He replied by return that there were problems communicating directly with Kitchener without French's permission, concluding "there can only be one C-in-C in the Army".[65] The King, though, was not prepared to allow French to avoid regular dialogue, stating via Wigram that there "ought to be a Standing Order that K should have the views of GHQ through the C-in-C once a fortnight or once a month".[66]

While this internecine struggle continued elements within the French government had been pressing for the opening of another front, this time in Macedonia and centred on the port city of Salonika. The aim was to prevent Germany and her Austro-Hungarian allies defeating neighbouring Serbia and effectively taking control of the Balkans. It was not a novel initiative. Churchill and Lloyd George had toyed with the idea since the start of the year.[67] By the late summer of 1915 it had caught the imagination of members of the Dardanelles Committee, the British government's military policy-making body.[68] The "Westerners", with Robertson again to the fore, fought a rear-guard action to rein back an initiative he labelled a "mad scheme" capable of "even losing the war".[69] He complained to Archie Murray, by this time CIGS, about the government's decision to commit British divisions that he claimed had been "sent away from this country [France] without prejudice as to where they should ultimately be employed, and the main contention of the GS [General Staff] was therefore utterly rejected".[70] Murray responded immediately and promised to "do all I possibly can to keep the Western as the main theatre of war … I have, inside and outside the War Council, strongly advocated no expedition to the Balkans, and I think we have succeeded in killing that mad scheme".[71]

Murray's confidence was misplaced.[72] Once again, Robertson had his knuckles rapped for speaking directly to officials at the War Office: "The C-in-C has recently strongly resented any opinion regarding the EF [Expeditionary Force being sent to Salonika] being given by me or anybody else except himself. I need add no more on this point".[73] Robertson questioned the strategic rationale for Salonika and complained "nothing could have been more pitiable than our proceedings of the last month. Germany suddenly sends about a dozen divisions into the Balkans … and

64 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/1/12), Wigram to Robertson, 10 August 1915.
65 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/1/13), Robertson to Wigram, 10 August 1915.
66 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/1/14), Wigram to Robertson, 13 August 1915.
67 Stephen Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets, Volume I – 1877-1918*, (London: Collins, 1970) p. 155.
68 The Dardanelles Committee replaced the War Council as the Cabinet's main war policy committee in May 1915 on the creation of Asquith's Coalition Government.
69 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/2/29), Robertson to Callwell, 23 October 1915.
70 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/3/1), Robertson to Murray, 23 October 1915.
71 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/3/2), Callwell to Robertson, 23 October 1915.
72 The Salonika campaign tied up a maximum of six British divisions in Macedonia until 1918.
73 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/3/4), Robertson to Murray, 24 October 1915.

Sir William Robertson. (Editor's collection)

we immediately seem to become panic stricken and helpless".[74] Instead he wanted a Franco-British plan for winning the war: "Our General Staff are unanimously of opinion that this plan should be based on killing Germans, and they hold it to be both useless and unsound to embark on a campaign in the Balkans".[75] For Robertson it was "a question of exhausting and wearing down the enemy … everything should be devoted to hammering away in this theatre".[76]

Robertson continued his campaign for a clear strategic blueprint for the war: a plan on which both Britain and France could agree and which, once and for all, acknowledged the primacy of the Western Front. At the end of November Clive briefed the CGS on the situation in the Balkans:

> Saw CGS and gave him a précis of the French appreciation. He thought little of it, and said so in picturesque terms. His whole idea, and quite rightly, is to get a plan agreed to by the two governments with a definite undertaking that they will not depart from it without consulting the other.[77]

At the same time, and arguably even more significantly for Britain's future war policy, Robertson was lobbying hard to establish the overarching authority of the Imperial General Staff at the War Office. In his view it needed a strong chief to represent the views of the military leadership directly to the government. It had become evident to him that the politicians at home needed clear and strong guidance from their military experts. Without such advice they would continue, as he saw it, to chop and change policy, with disastrous results. The absence of a powerful and respected General Staff in Whitehall had resulted in a "policy vacuum" that was filled by the single-minded Secretary of State for War. As the year progressed and Kitchener's

74 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (3/2/22), notes by Robertson on the conduct of the war, 31 October 1915, p. 1.
75 Ibid., p. 1.
76 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/2/24), Robertson to Callwell, 16 October 1915, Robertson Papers.
77 LHCMA, Clive Papers, (2/22), Clive Diary, 29 November 1915.

authority waned that vacuum was filled by "strategic entrepreneurs" such as Churchill and Lloyd George.[78] Robertson made vigorous use of his network of contacts within the politico-military elite to press his case for a strong General Staff to guide policy which, "with a trusted and competent head, should be allowed to function and do the work for which it was designed, and which it alone can do". He claimed to Lord Stamfordham that the GS had been "obliterated". With the advice of Britain's theatre commanders-in-chief and of the General Staff at home the government would "be in a position to see where they are, and what they can best do. The present method of this higher conduct of the war can only lead to disaster". He took a dim view of those he thought were advising the politicians:

> The government must receive the best military advice at home (Hankey and Callwell are I suppose the chief advisors. Ridiculous!) The Secretary of State for War has not the time to study matters and formulate advice … This is no time for mincing matters. I feel you may not dislike to hear my real views. I am not in a position to express them to anyone else … make such use of my views as you deem best in the good of the cause.[79]

It is hardly surprising that, with a Secretary of State for War as strong as Kitchener, the General Staff in the War Office was effortlessly sidelined. The GS was a relatively new institution, established as part of the post-Boer War reforms in 1904.[80] While an improvement on the somewhat *ad hoc* system of the past, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff[81] was far from the pre-eminent voice in the councils of war either before the outbreak of hostilities or in the twelve months afterwards. French himself, never the epitome of administrative rectitude, had held the role until forced to resign over the Curragh Incident in March 1914, but his successors in the post were not strong characters. General Sir Charles Douglas, in post at the outbreak of war, died of overwork in September and was replaced by Lieutenant–General Sir James Wolfe Murray. The latter's failure to stand up to the domineering Kitchener earned him the nickname 'Sheep' Murray from the ever caustic Churchill.[82] In fairness to both Douglas and Wolfe Murray, Kitchener was a supremely self-confident figure at this time, unassailable in councils of state, admired by Britain's French allies and immensely popular in

78 Ian Beckett,'King George V and His Generals' in Brian Bond, *The First World War and British Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 257.
79 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/1/5), Robertson to Stamfordham, undated draft but apparently written between 23 June and 11 July 1915.
80 John Gooch, *The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy c. 1900–1916* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), esp. pp. 97-130.
81 From 1904 to 1909 the title was Chief of the General Staff. In 1909 the post was renamed Chief of the Imperial General Staff.
82 CAC, Hankey Diary, (HNKY 1/1), 23 September 1914.

the country at large.[83] It would take a strong man indeed to confront and tame him. Kitchener sidelined the CIGS and his staff, effectively undertaking the job himself while at the same time performing the onerous task of Secretary of State for War.[84] After Kitchener's death, the commission set up to inquire into the Gallipoli campaign summed up his style:

> We think it is much to be regretted that the principles of the devolution of authority and responsibility upon which the War Office system was based were ignored by Lord Kitchener. All the evidence laid before us points to the conclusion that Lord Kitchener was not in the habit of consulting his subordinates, that he frequently gave orders over the heads of the Chiefs of the Departments and sometimes without the knowledge of the Chief of the General Staff, and, in fact, that he centralised the whole administration of the General Staff in his own hands.[85]

There were other complications: "In attempting to make its views heard, the General Staff was hampered by the loss of all its senior and many junior members to the Expeditionary Force".[86] Robertson was clear about where he believed blame for the weakness of the GS lay: "The neglect of statesmen, soldiers, and sailors alike to make sufficiently close study of the principles by which the functions of High Command ought to be governed."[87] Significantly, when Robertson took over as CIGS he took with him a cadre of trusted staff officers who had served him as CGS and who he had hand-picked at the beginning of the year.[88]

During 1915, Kitchener's political dominance was slowly eroded as disappointment over the stalemate and high casualties on the Western Front was compounded by failure and further losses in the Dardanelles and then in Macedonia. As far as Robertson was concerned the waning of Kitchener's power created the danger that the 'armchair strategists' would fill the vacuum, but also offered opportunities for a new way of making war policy. At the height of the government's enthusiasm for the Salonika campaign Robertson chided Callwell about the General Staff's failings:

83 For Kitchener's character see George H. Cassar, *Kitchener: Architect of Victory* (London: William Kimber, 1977) and George H. Cassar, *Kitchener's War* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2004).
84 Bourne, *Britain and the Great War*, pp. 139-145.
85 Dardanelles Commission: First Report, TNA CAB 19/1 (1917-18) p. 13.
86 Gooch, *Plans of War*, p. 302.
87 Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen, Vol I*, (London: Cassell, 1926), p. 157.
88 Robertson, *Private to Field-Marshal*, pp. 222-3 and pp. 250-2.

> The whole conduct of the war wants getting in hand, firstly by our government, secondly by you of the General Staff and thirdly as between these two and the French. This is where the German has had the advantage all along.[89]

For Wully the matter was a simple one, as he advised the CIGS Archie Murray in November 1915:

> So long as any one of a large number of men is allowed to put forward his own particular project no progress can possibly be made. If I were in your place I would, as soon as I had finished my survey of the whole business, refuse to write any more papers. I would stick to the views I had put down and if they were rejected, those who rejected them should put their views in their place … I would be led into no more argument, and especially into no verbal argument as to other plans.[90]

This robust approach was already familiar to Robertson's military and political colleagues. At a meeting with Cabinet members in early July 1915, alongside French and Wilson:

> The CGS had been asked if he had anything to say. He produced a map of France from somewhere or other and began to speak. From time to time one or another member interrupted, and Sir William then stood silent, looking at the interrupter from under his eyebrows. He spoke for ¾ of an hour and the impression created seems to have been extraordinary. They realised that this was a man who really knew what he was talking about, who really based his deductions on unanswerable facts.[91]

It was a manner that would prove unpopular with politicians in 1917, but at the time it seemed a welcome contrast to the tongue-tied and secretive Kitchener. Later in 1915 Robertson produced his "Memorandum on the Conduct of the War". In 29 closely argued points he made clear what he believed needed to be done. He wanted an end to the "sideshows", greater weight for the British in the Allied councils of war, and the time and resources to deliver victory alongside the French. But, he concluded, victory would not be achieved "unless we have a carefully considered, complete, and accepted plan upon which both countries can base their action".[92] His covering note

89 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/2/33), Robertson to Callwell, 26 October 1915.
90 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/3/7), Robertson to Murray, 30 November 1915.
91 LHCMA, Clive Papers, (2/2), Clive Diary, 5 July 1915.
92 Memorandum on the Conduct of the War, 5 November 1915, reproduced in full in Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen*, Vol. 1, pp. 196-206.

engaged the Prime Minister with his abiding conviction that politicians should receive unequivocal counsel:

> I feel so strongly that we can win through if only we decide what is the right thing to do, and then resolutely stick to our decision and refuse to be directed from it by the many specious temptations which always beset those responsible in time of war.[93]

The memorandum may well have been a barely disguised application for the post of CIGS. Robertson's sparring partner at the War Office, Charles Callwell, told Henry Wilson: "He undoubtedly has impressed the politician people, and I do not know that Murray has; they think he is too much under K's thumb – as indeed he is".[94]

By the close of 1915 Kitchener had lost most of his political capital and, seemingly, much of his self-confidence:

> In all these negotiations with our Ally [in relation to the Salonika campaign] we are terribly hampered by Lord K's changes of attitude which are enough to bewilder anybody. He told me rather plaintively yesterday that the Cabinet pay no attention to his views and always want to know what the General Staff have to say about it.[95]

A day later Hankey saw Lord Curzon, a member of the Dardanelles Committee, who told him: "His solution is to get rid of Lord K., in whom the Cabinet has lost confidence".[96] In fact Kitchener had already initiated discussions with Robertson about the future, as Asquith revealed to Hankey: "Apparently K had asked R to become C.I.G.S. … Robertson had replied by formulating conditions – the War Ctee. to be the supreme authority, but no military operations to be discussed by it without first going through the General Staff".[97] According to Asquith, Kitchener had told him that he agreed with the idea: "The P.M. is very anxious to get rid of Lord K. who, he says, darkens counsel and is a really bad administrator".[98]

For Robertson this was a fundamental moment in his career. Even if he shared His Lordship's dim view of the political class, he had profoundly disapproved of Kitchener's support for the Dardanelles and Salonika campaigns. Friends and colleagues offered advice:

93 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (4/3/14), Robertson to Asquith, covering note with Robertson's 'Views on the Conduct of the War', 6 November 1915.
94 IWM, Callwell Papers, (2/75/74), Callwell to Wilson, 13 December 1915.
95 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/2/38), Callwell to Robertson, 9 December 1915.
96 CAC, Hankey Papers, (HNKY 1/1), Hankey Diary, 10 December 1915.
97 CAC, Hankey Papers, (HNKY 1/1), Hankey Diary, 8 December 1915.
98 Ibid.

> The PM and other members of the War Committee are in despair at the vagaries of their colleague. At the present moment I believe the situation is that K has told the PM that he wishes to go, but K quite agrees that the formation of an IGS is necessary. The PM says that K is tired and weary and wants to be relieved of responsibility. He thinks that K would never tolerate a GS sending out orders and corresponding with Generals, as K has always been accustomed to send out his own telegrams, often in his own name. Unfortunately while K was away [inspecting the Dardanelles theatre] and the PM at the War Office, all the departments began to function, and many say the difference was remarkable! HM has just seen the PM, and begged him not to come to any conclusions about K until he had seen you.[99]

The King was heavily engaged in the issue:

> I have had a good think – last night, today, and I am still thinking – about K. As you know HM is devoted to K. I am very sad to think of K on the brink of a precipice. K's position at present is untenable. He is discredited with all his 21 colleagues in the Cabinet. Even his colleagues in the War Committee think he is a positive danger. He has been so unstable in his advice on military affairs.[100]

Wigram had three options in mind for retaining Kitchener. Option one – leaving things as they were – was "impossible"; the second option was for Robertson to succeed Murray and work under Kitchener as CIGS; the third option was Robertson's proposal for the Field Marshal to stay as War Minister with Wully directly advising the politicians. If Kitchener would accept the third option:

> So much the better. I, like you, thought he would. But he thought it meant responsibility without executive action, and told the PM he could not be placed in this position. We cannot afford to lose K's unique personality, and influence with the French and masses of the Empire. K apparently is admirable in these conferences, providing he is filled up with correct ideas … after 3 months away I came back to find K a changed man, and the war has told on him tremendously. I believe the idea of evacuating the D[ardanelle]'s haunts him and he cannot sleep at night. The PM spoke very nicely about K to HM last night.[101]

Anxious though he might have been to please his sovereign Robertson was determined, as he had been throughout the year, that unless the CIGS could be the government's principal military advisor it was not a role he could accept:

99 LHCMA, Robertson Papers (7/1/23), Wigram to Robertson, 9 December 1915.
100 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/1/24), Wigram to Robertson, 10 December 1915.
101 Ibid.

> I am not sure that I know my own mind with regard to Lord K. He seems indispensable as regards the provision of the resources we require in men etc. etc., but when we come to the application of these resources he certainly holds queer ideas while his methods seem certain to lead to trouble. He would be an enormous standby to a CIGS if he allowed the General Staff to do the whole of its work in its own way and if he devoted his time to remainder of the work.[102]

Robertson's "bargain" with Kitchener is well documented. Kitchener eventually agreed that for Robertson to accept the War Office post he would also have to be the sole source of military advice to the politicians.[103] As a result the government gained a robust new CIGS who was clear about his strategic views. The Western Front was the primary front and Germany was the main enemy. Defeat of Germany would win the war; nothing else would do. What the politicians did not receive was subservient compliance. Two days before formally taking up the post Robertson offered a taste of what was to come in a letter to Hankey. Recent Staff reports had outlined the military situation and made recommendations but had not clarified what was required from the War Committee in the form of clear policy instructions.[104] Robertson was adamant that an accepted plan was essential: "Until we get one, no good will ever be done".[105] He was preparing "a short Paper asking the War Council whether they approve of the military policy advocated by the General Staff, adding that if they do not approve of it to tell me what the policy is to be as I have no other recommendations to make".[106] He was as good as his word. On the day he formally became CIGS Robertson asked the War Committee to confirm that France and Flanders was the "main theatre of operations", that Salonika and Gallipoli should be evacuated and a defensive policy adopted in Mesopotamia: "If the War Committee does not approve of the above policy it is necessary that an alternative policy (regarding which I have no recommendation) should be formulated."[107]

As for the fate of Sir John French, Robertson's influence in the events leading up to his dismissal at the end of 1915 receives some, albeit limited, attention in the historiography. His involvement is characterised as a minor part of a wider conspiracy

102 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (7/1/25), Robertson to Wigram, 11 December 1915.
103 Robertson, *Private to Field-Marshal* pp. 236-245, and Woodward, *Field Marshal Sir William Robertson* pp. 20-25.
104 Perhaps unsurprisingly considering the number of times the nomenclature changed, Robertson and his contemporaries occasionally used the incorrect term for the government's principal war policy body, as in the quotes on this page. It began as the War Council, became the Dardanelles Committee, then the War Committee and ultimately the War Cabinet. In all but its final guise, where it took on executive responsibility for decision-making, it made recommendations to the full Cabinet.
105 CAC, Hankey Papers, (2/2), Robertson to Hankey, 21 December 1915.
106 Ibid.
107 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (4/1/13), Robertson to the War Committee, printed note, 23 December 1915.

involving a range of other more important players, principally Haig, Kitchener, Wilson and even the King himself. As we have seen, study of the primary sources reveals that Robertson was not so much a reticent by-stander as a key player in the drama, airing his frustrations with his chief to a number of senior colleagues. If French had consciously intended to alienate his Chief of Staff he could not have done better than when he invited the clubbable Henry Wilson to join his mess in the spring of 1915. Douglas Haig considered it "a very great mistake" because Wilson was "such a terrible intriguer, and is sure to make mischief".[108] Robertson, who was only allowed to see his chief at set times later made light of this arrangement, but the affected nonchalance rings hollow.[109] With his Chief of Staff alienated Sir John had few friends left. After the failure of the Loos offensive and the subsequent unedifying row between French and Haig over the employment of reserves the former's departure was inevitable.[110]

There had been talk in some circles of Robertson replacing French as Commander-in-Chief of the BEF, but there is no evidence that Wully personally pursued the matter.[111] The fact that his career to date had been heavily biased in favour of staff work, combined with his tireless lobbying during 1915 for clear military policy advice from a strong CIGS, suggest this outcome was always unlikely. When Sir John was forced to resign Robertson made his position clear: "He tells me he has recommended me to succeed him. But this will not do either from the point of view of seniority or experience in the command of troops".[112] Haig's combat experience meant he was always going to be the logical successor as C-in-C. For Robertson it was always going to be promotion to CIGS or nothing.

108 Sheffield and Bourne, (eds), *Haig: Diaries and Letters*, 12 April 1915, p. 115.
109 Robertson, *Private to Field Marshal*, p. 222.
110 'It was this failure that gave the Cabinet, Kitchener, Haig and Robertson the opportunity to replace Sir John French,' Tim Travers, 'The Hidden Army: Structural Problems in the British Officer Corps, 1900-1918', *Journal of Contemporary History* 17 (3) (1982) p. 530.
111 Woodward, *Field Marshal Sir William Robertson* pp. 24-25.
112 LHCMA, Robertson Papers, (4/3/29), Robertson to Kitchener, 5 December 1915.

4

Henry Horne as Divisional Commander during 1915

Simon Robbins

On Christmas Day 1914, Henry Horne dined with Sir Douglas Haig, who provided "an excellent dinner, turtle soup sent by Leopold Rothschild, & turkey from Carisville sent by [William George] Jameson[1] who rents the fishing there, and who apparently married Haig's sister", but the convivial mood was rather spoiled as the afternoon was spent "arranging about a new gun we have got for firing at aeroplanes".[2] Such were the duties that Horne fulfilled as Major General Royal Artillery, 1st Army (MGRA) acting as Haig's CRA and Artillery Adviser,[3] "to superintend the artillery" of the three corps of the newly formed First Army commanded by the newly promoted Haig, who was, in Horne's opinion, "much the best of all the Commanders out here".[4] However, on returning from a visit to IV Corps concerning trench mortars on the morning of 1 January, Horne discovered that he had been appointed to temporary command of the 2nd Division in place of Major General C.C. (later General Sir Charles) Monro, who had in turn been given command of the I Corps in place of Haig, who now commanded the First Army. Horne notified his wife in "a hurried line" that:

> I have just been ordered to take command of the 2nd Division temporarily. I am in hopes that this means it will be permanent. This will indeed be a lift up – to command a Division. It is General Haig's recommendation that gets me this.

1 Jameson Irish Whiskey was established in Dublin in 1780 by John Jameson, a Scottish lawyer from Alloa, who married Margaret Haig, a sister of the brothers who founded John Haig & Co Ltd which produced Scotch whisky. Willie Jameson, a yatching friend of the Prince of Wales, married Douglas Haig's sister, Henrietta, in 1869.

2 Imperial War Museum (IWM), Horne Papers, General Lord Horne to Lady Horne, 25 December 1914.

3 The National Archives (TNA), WO 256/3. Field Mashal Earl Haig, Diary, 29 December 1914.

4 IWM, Horne Papers, General Lord Horne, Diary, 30 December 1914, and General Lord Horne to Lady Horne, 30 December 1914.

> My address will now be "HdQrs 2nd Division, Expeditionary Force". I write this in great haste as I have just come in from my round and am ordered to move at once. I go to the HdQrs about 2 miles from Hinges. I do hope I am given the command permanently & I think I shall be.[5]

Indeed, Haig had recommended Horne for command of the 2nd Division when visited by the Military Secretary, Brigadier-General Hon W. (later Major-General Hon Sir William) Lambton.[6] Haig would also be successful in ensuring that Horne's command of 2nd Division became a permanent appointment. Horne joined his new division at Locon late in the afternoon of 1 January and took over command from Brigadier General (later Major-General Sir) Robert Fanshawe, who commanded the 6th Infantry Brigade,[7] ready to face the challenge of an independent command.

In his diary for that day, Horne noted laconically: "Appointed to command 2nd Div with HQ at Locon. Joined about 4 pm".[8] To be given command of an infantry division in place of Monro, an infantryman and musketry expert who, as Chief Instructor and then Commandant of the School of Musketry at Hythe, had pioneered new infantry fire-tactics after the Boer War, was "a great compliment for a gunner". The division, consisting of three brigades of infantry, twelve batteries of artillery, and one squadron of cavalry, had over 20,000 men. Pleased at being selected and having a command of his own, Horne was based in a headquarters which was "not far from Hinges" and had "a little room" as his office.[9] As a divisional general Horne also had a motor car, "a very comfortable closed up Rolls Royce, for his own use".[10]

Sir Henry Horne. (Bain Collection, Library of Congress)

5 IWM, Horne Papers, General Lord Horne to Lady Horne, 1 January 1915.
6 TNA WO 256/3, Field-Marshal Earl Haig, Diary, 31 December 1914.
7 IWM, Horne Papers, General Lord Horne, Diary, 1 January 1915.
8 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 1 January 1915.
9 IWM, Horne Papers, General Lord Horne to his wife, 1 January 1915.
10 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 14 January 1915.

Although given command of a division, Horne remained influential as regards the development of the artillery and was regularly consulted on technical matters by senior officers, including Haig who visited him to ask "some question about artillery matters" and "generally consults me when he wants information about artillery",[11] and Major-General Sir Stanley von Donop (Master General of the Ordnance), who was in France "for a few days looking round" and "came to ask me many questions regarding guns &c".[12] He also attended conferences at GHQ with other gunners, such as Frederick Wing and John Du Cane, to discuss "the organization of the artillery of the new divisions" which were arriving in France,[13] and to consider its "reorganization" into four-gun batteries.[14] Also in April 1915, Horne observed experiments "in cutting the wire entanglements in front of the German trenches" with his guns,[15] which were "very successful".[16] One "amateur warrior" described how at "an experimental dug-out versus trench mortar test" he witnessed from a ditch how Horne "was here, there and everywhere in his keenness to appraise the results of a noisy contest".[17]

Henry Horne's relatively short career as divisional commander on the Western Front during 1915 provides insights into some facets of the learning process during the First World War, and demonstrates that the trajectory of 'the learning curve' was not necessarily always an upward one as, like the value of shares, the professional abilities and operational performance of armies can depreciate as well as appreciate as a result of both internal and external factors. It affords hard evidence of how the high command struggled to adapt operationally to the stalemate in the trenches during a period (1915-16) when the Army was rapidly expanding as an organisation from a small colonial police force into an army capable of fighting on a continental scale. Horne was an outstanding example of the group of senior officers who rose to high command during the final two years of the war, having undergone the most rigorous on-the-job training at the front during 1915-16, a crucible which burned away all but the most able. Horne was a highly professional artillery officer and his career contradicts many of the commonly held assumptions about the British High Command. He was not a chateau general but regularly visited his troops, supervised their training, looked after their comforts and did all he could to minimize their casualties.

As commander of 2nd Division, Horne was to build on the laurels he had gained during 1914 as Brigadier General Royal Artillery with the I Corps under Sir Douglas Haig. Haig was to remain as his mentor and patron for the rest of the war. Horne

11 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 15 August 1915.
12 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 28 January 1915.
13 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 14 January 1915, and Horne to his wife, 13-14 January 1915.
14 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 14 January 1915.
15 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 19 April 1915.
16 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 19 April 1915.
17 Newspaper cuttings from *The Daily Dispatch* and *The North Mail & Newcastle Chronicle*, 29 July 1929, Horne Papers 117, IWM.

emerged as one of the young, energetic and capable commanders who rose with the rapid expansion of the BEF in 1915-16, being promoted to all levels of the high command to replace older or inefficient generals who were at times ruthlessly removed. It is typical of Horne's energy that following the use of gas at Ypres in April 1915 he began immediately "making experiments with a view to finding out how to counteract the asphyxiating gas which the Germans now use", providing buckets of lime water in the trenches,[18] and had "thousands" of gas masks made, "employing soldiers to make the wire frames & French women to sew on the stuff to cover them".[19]

During January 1915 Horne was "very busy settling down" in his new command,[20] "consolidating the defences of the Line",[21] and getting used to the novel conditions of the Western Front. The 2nd Division "was recovering from a terrible gruelling which had almost spelt annihilation" and during the winter of 1914-15 in northern France, which "was a very cold and wet one", the "pitiless tactics of trench warfare" had to be learnt and taught by the troops under the leadership of Horne who showed "unflagging energy" in bringing his Division to "a high state of efficiency".[22] The "very flat & very low lying" country of Flanders, which was rather like Cambridgeshire or Lincolnshire, meant that the trenches soon filled with water and that the men had "to stand in water or at any rate in wet slime or mud which pulls their boots off".[23] Horne quickly became aware that the water problem was "serious" and that the very wet trenches made "readjustment of the method of defending the line necessary",[24] noting that "the country is so wet, in parts you cannot dig trenches without their filling up with water, and the bottom of them churns up into mud", leaving the men "to stand in mud & water".[25]

Horne and his staff were "working hard to devise other means of fortifying the line" so as "to get the men out of the water by building up the parapets called breastworks instead of digging down", allowing the troops to stand on dry land.[26] Worried that "the water problem grows serious" as the "trenches are now flooded in many places", Horne made arrangements "to hold line by posts in the trenches and breastworks, defended houses etc in rear".[27] Horne was also much occupied with "visiting the different points and satisfying myself that work is being done to either improve matters or gain ground towards the Germans",[28] and holding "a conference of Brigadiers, artillery

18 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 26 April 1915.
19 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 29 April 1915.
20 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 2 January 1915.
21 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 2-9 and 16-18 January 1915.
22 Major-General Sir H Uniacke, General the Lord Horne of Stirkoke, *Journal of the Royal Artillery*, October 1929, p.5.
23 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 3 January 1915.
24 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 9 and 10 January 1915.
25 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 2 January 1915.
26 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 16 January 1915.
27 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary Book No.1, 11 January 1915.
28 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 3 January 1915.

commanders &c on the methods we adopt for defending our line".[29] By April 1915, Horne's division was using over 10,000 sandbags per day,[30] as "our parapets are all faced with sandbags & in some cases where the ground is too wet to dig a trench it is built almost entirely of sandbags". As the country dried up Horne also advanced his line "making new breastworks in some places".[31]

Another major development was the return to mining as a method of trying to break the deadlock of siege warfare and, owing to the particular conditions on his sector of the front, Horne was soon heavily involved, writing in February 1915 to I Corps to request the appointment of "a fully qualified mining engineer" at each brigade to deal with the German mining activities.[32] This plea was taken up by the First Army, who "urged that steps should be taken to organize mining units" as "the enemy was thought to be mining opposite Givenchy", and "there was no doubt that he had undertaken mining operations opposite Cuinchy". All corps in the First Army "were directed to organize their existing resources for mine warfare to carry out mining operations on a properly organized system".[33] On 17 February 1915 GHQ authorised the formation of Tunnelling Companies and I Corps "was ordered to get the Regular personnel of the 1st Company ready at once, in order to incorporate the first party of civil engineers which was due to arrive shortly".[34] I Corps soon reported that a Tunnelling Company had been formed, that the Regular personnel been collected, and that of the civilian men required, "18 had arrived, and were already at work".[35]

Major (later Lieutenant-Colonel Sir John) Norton Griffiths MP, who had been attached to the staff of the Engineer-in-Chief at GHQ to initiate and organize the new Tunnelling Companies, was sent to the 2nd Division "to investigate the conditions of mining, and with a view to the special enlistment of miners",[36] and with 1 officer and 18 miners joined the division "to inspect the mining work being carried out with Lieutenant-Colonel [later Brigadier-General G P] Scholfield, the CRE".[37] Horne later remembered that Norton Griffiths, "a man of great energy", was "very useful indeed" in helping with the mining and tunnelling carried out by the 2nd Division.[38] It was also another method by which Horne sought to dominate the enemy. The result

29 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 19 January 1915.
30 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 21 April 1915.
31 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 26 April 1915.
32 TNA WO 95/1284, Major-General H.S. Horne to I Corps, 10 February 1915.
33 TNA WO 95/2, Appendix 'A': Mining Operations and the Formation of Mining Units, First Army Weekly Report on Operations, 14 February 1915.
34 TNA WO 95/2. General Sir Douglas Haig, First Army Weekly Report on Operations, 17 February 1915.
35 TNA WO 95/2, General Sir Douglas Haig, First Army Weekly Report on Operations, 24 February 1915.
36 TNA WO 95/2, General Sir Douglas Haig, First Army Weekly Report on Operations, 14 February 1915.
37 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 20 February 1915.
38 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 17 November 1917.

was a long battle of endurance with the Germans. Both sides sought to literally undermine each other's defences by digging tunnels beneath them and blowing up mines.

For example, in May 1915, having taken over some line, Horne reported that "the Germans had the upper hand & were very annoying" but thanks to the "energy" of Brigadier-General (later Major-General) A.C. Daly (6th Brigade) "we have now quite got the better of them", having "blown up one or two small mines & forced them back".[39] Horne noted during a quiet period in August 1915 that "mining & bombing is our chief method of fighting just at present".[40] Indeed, in that same month, the Commander-in-Chief Sir John French sent Horne "a complimentary note regarding the way we have carried out all the bombing & mining fighting which goes on on my section".[41] The cost was high, however, and the Germans blew in a small mine at Cuinchy killing 4 miners and Lieutenant F.P. Lacy MC, the mining officer in charge attached to the 170th Tunnelling Company from the Cumberland and Westmoreland Yeomanry, who was "a particularly good officer & fine fellow".[42]

As soon as he had got his trenches to his liking, Horne hoped to "begin to worry" the Germans,[43] and "to give them a push before long",[44] as he was "so anxious to be able to do something towards pushing back the Germans here in front of us".[45] Horne had an early initiation into the attritional, tit-for-tat nature of trench warfare in early January when, having "managed to blow in a bit of their trenches & shoot at them as they run out of it", the next day the Germans "knocked down a high building called the Brewery from which the artillery officers are in the habit of observing".[46] In the meantime he was content to "knock their trenches about with our guns and give them a hard time generally".[47] Horne noted that "the Germans work away at their defences in front of us, and we worry them as much as we can".[48] Typical of Horne's thrusting and restless aggression was "a little enterprise" in April 1915 in which he sent out a small party from one of his recently arrived Territorial battalions to raid the German line because:

> If they are successful they will be pleased with themselves & if they do not succeed it will not matter. It does the Territorials good after they have been gradually introduced & entered to trench work to have a little dig at the Germans![49]

39 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 25 June 1915.
40 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 16 August 1915.
41 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 15 August 1915.
42 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 14 August 1915.
43 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 2 January 1915.
44 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 7 January 1915.
45 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 9 January 1915.
46 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 3 January 1915.
47 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 12 January 1915.
48 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 29 March 1915.
49 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 27 April 1915.

During 1915 the BEF lacked any formal structure for learning the lessons of trench warfare, or for training New Army divisions upon arrival in France. In fact, the Army suffered from an anarchy in training doctrine until 1916-17 when a large number of training schools were established within the BEF and a Directorate of Training was formed (in early 1917), producing manuals and pamphlets and making a very significant contribution to victory. The increasingly skilled tactics of the British on the battlefields of 1917 and 1918 rested on the training which began in some cases as early as 1915, becoming truly earnest in late 1916 or early 1917, after the poor performance by many units on the Somme in mid-1916. Thereafter, there was much more emphasis on training as the war progressed and generals realised its overwhelming importance. However, in 1915, this lay in the future.

The phenomenon of the collapse in tactical expertise in 1915 is often ignored in assessing the achievements of the British Army during the First World War. With a 'de-skilled' army it was very difficult for the British to gain mastery over their German opponents. It was not until late 1917, three years after the beginning of the war, that the British were able to regain standards comparable with 1914. This absence of tactical ability hampered British operations throughout 1915 and made the year an unforgiving school for officers and men.

For the better commanders, like Horne, the fighting of 1915 highlighted the need to drill the troops and, as the year progressed, they began to re-emphasize the crucial importance of investing time in thorough training. British tactical skill began to improve slowly, but it would be a long time before the British were able to meet the Germans on equal terms. Throughout the war the comparatively low level of training of the troops and their junior leadership, a result of the rapid expansion of the army and the heavy casualties in 1914-16, was a serious problem which had a dramatic effect on the British tactical performance. This lack of training was reflected in the relatively poor performance of the British Army in 1915. As the cadre of Regulars became increasingly depleted by casualties and stretched by the expansion of the Army, British junior leaders, both young officers and NCO's, "were just as gallant as the Germans, but were at great disadvantage" because their German counterparts "had gone through their 2-years' period of compulsory training & were real soldiers, with a well-developed military instinct" whereas "many of our young officers came straight from an office stool or some commercial employment" and "could not be expected to be in the same class as leaders".[50] Similarly, the percentage of the French troops who "had had no prewar training" was "at the very most 10% and probably considerably less" whereas that of the New Army troops "with any prewar training [was] at a maximum of 3% or 4% of the personnel".[51]

50 TNA: CAB 45/116, Major-General W.L.O. Twiss to Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, 18 September 1938.
51 TNA CAB 45/132, Brigadier W.E. Clark to Edmonds, 21 November 1934.

Like other senior commanders, Horne spent much of his time supervising training carried out within the 2nd Division. Horne regularly visited his brigadiers and his brigades, for example visiting all three brigades, the 4th (Guards) Brigade at Cuinchy, the 5th and 6th Infantry Brigades at different times in January.[52] He supervised the training of units, notably the Inniskilling Fusiliers and 2nd HLI,[53] and the 1st King's;[54] as well as those arriving on the Western Front, such as officers attached from 11th Division of Kitchener's Army "for three days stay" and battalions of the London Regiment from the 47th Division, which were attached for instruction.[55] He also watched the Inniskilling Fusiliers and the Worcestershire Regiments practicing the assault,[56] inspected the 34th and 36th Brigades RFA,[57] and rode "round a good many of the battery positions" with his CRA, Brigadier-General E.M. Percival.[58] In particular, Horne noted that the 2nd Inniskilling Fusiliers were "a very mixed lot of Special reservists & men who have rejoined for one year etc" and needed "some pulling together".[59]

Horne also made extensive reconnaissances of his front both for defensive and offensive purposes, visiting the Water Tower at Vermelles, Fosse No 9,[60] and the 'Electric Tower',[61] to study the ground and had "been pretty well all round the line and studied it from many points" to "get it well into my head", and had "long walks in doing so".[62] He visited the trenches "to see things for myself".[63] This activity set the pattern for Horne and this routine of visits, inspections and constant touring of his sector to inspect the ground and visit his troops would continue for the rest of the war. Like other senior commanders, such as Haig, Plumer, and Rawlinson, Horne sought to establish trust and cultivate teamwork by means of personal daily contact with senior commanders and subordinate formations. Horne was much more than a mere martinet, visiting his subordinates every day and cheering them up by creating an atmosphere of confidence.[64]

52 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 22, 28 and 31 January 1915.
53 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 2 May 1915.
54 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 4 May 1915.
55 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 8 February and 25 March 1915.
56 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 1 May 1915.
57 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 23 January 1915.
58 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 20 January 1915.
59 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary Book No.1, 28 January 1915.
60 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 13 June 1915.
61 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 21 June 1915.
62 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 3 June 1915.
63 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 7 March 1915.
64 TNA CAB 45/123, General Lord Jeffreys to Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, 31 July 1931.

During his tenure of command of the 2nd Division, Horne also spent a lot of his time receiving visitors, such as Lord Kitchener,[65] Sir John French,[66] Sir Douglas Haig,[67] Sir Charles Monro (I Corps),[68] Sir Henry Rawlinson (IV Corps),[69] General Bolgert (58th French Division),[70] the Russian Military Attaché,[71] the Bishops of London, Khartoum, and Birmingham;[72] and meeting the three Fanshawe brothers, Sir Edward (Artillery), Sir Hew (Cavalry), and Sir Robert (Infantry);[73] dining with fellow officers of all ranks, such as Lord Cavan (4th Guards Brigade),[74] Lieutenant-Colonel G.P.T. Feilding and Lord Feilding;[75] and attending conferences with superiors and subordinates, notably Sir John French and Sir Douglas Haig.[76] Horne also spent much time attending Church parades;[77] visiting hospitals, such as in Bethune,[78] the Bath House, which catered for "60 men an hour for 8 hours",[79] boot makers and tailors shops",[80] the billets of the 9th Highland Light Infantry (Glasgow Highlanders) and attending a concert given by the 3rd Coldstream Guards;[81] inspection of troops, such as the Inniskilling Fusiliers, by General Monro;[82] supervising the relief of troops in the front line;[83] and "doing office work",[84] ofttimes till late on "a busy day" when Horne often did not finish his work "until after 11.30" as there was always "much to arrange & attend to" and "so many people to see!"[85]

The tendency to concentrate on the mistakes made while the Army was adapting to *terra incognita* during the period 1915-17 has meant that the process by which the Army developed a war-winning staff in 1917-18 has been neglected. One of the biggest problems faced by the Army was how to produce enough staff officers capable

65 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 8 July 1915.
66 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 13 February 1915, and Horne to his wife, 15 August 1915.
67 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 6 January 1915.
68 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 9 January 1915.
69 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 8 January 1915.
70 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 11 February 1915.
71 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 28 April 1915.
72 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne Diary, 2 April 1915 and 16 August 1915, and to his wife, 16 August 1915.
73 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 4 April 1915.
74 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 22 January 1915.
75 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 8 February 1915.
76 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 13 February 1915, 27 April 1915, 6 May 1915.
77 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 3 January 1915.
78 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 15 January 1915.
79 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 10 February 1915.
80 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 4 March 1915.
81 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 5 March 1915.
82 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 28 January 1915.
83 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 2 and 3 February 1915.
84 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 5 January 1915.
85 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 20 January 1915.

of running the bureaucracy, creating the efficient command and staff methods at which the German Army excelled, and manning the staffs of the large formations required in warfare on a continental scale. Critics, such as Basil Liddell Hart, have completely failed to understand that the skills demanded in the leadership of mass armies in an industrialized age were more managerial than the heroic generalship of the 'Great Captains'. By the end of 1915, in addition to the divisional commanders and staffs required to man the forty divisional headquarters, commanders and staff officers had to be provided for three Army and nineteen Corps headquarters, all of which were created during 1915 in France alone.

Clearly "the difficulties and desire for change that have arisen during the war" were "due chiefly to the rapid rise of both Commanders and Staff Officers with absolutely no Staff experience" and while "brains, ability and personal gallantry" were useful they could "not compensate for lack of military knowledge, far less for lack of good staff training".[86] While it was one thing to theorise about the achievement of good command and staff procedures, it was quite another to develop enough staff officers with the talent for the large-scale operations which were now required. Major-General J.F.C. Fuller noted during the war that "our weak point is our Staffs not the men".[87] It was impossible to "expect a General Staff only inaugurated 9 years ago, if so long, on a basis of 6 Divisions, and insufficient for that, to provide adequate staff officers for 60 Divisions"[88] and "to talk of 25 Corps is to talk like a madman or a fool" because it had "taken our German friends 40 years to make 25 Corps".[89]

Only 32 officers were admitted to Camberley each year during the 1890s[90] compared to 60 students in 1930[91] and 90 in 1952[92] respectively, nearly double and three times the number which passed through pre-1914. This meant that graduates were the elite of the Army and certainly the year of 1913 was a vintage one, including as it did two future Field-Marshals, Ironside and Dill,[93] who were to rise to the rank of Brigadier-

86 IWM, Butler Papers, 69/10/1, [Lieutenant-General] Sir Richard Butler, Memorandum on 'Headquarters Units with a Division', 12 December 1918.
87 Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA), Fuller Papers IV/3/228, Major-General J.F.C. Fuller to his mother, 27 March 1918.
88 IWM, French Papers, 75/46/1. Lord Esher to Field-Marshal Sir John French, 26 June 1915.
89 LHCMA, Maurice Papers, 3/4/3, Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson to General Lord Rawlinson, 16 September 1914.
90 LHCMA, Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, Memoirs, Chapter XIV, Edmonds Papers III/2/3, LHCMA; Edmonds Papers, I/2A/1, Regulations Respecting The Staff College, War Office, 1894; LHCMA; Edmonds, *Four Generations of Staff College Students, Part I: 1896*, The Army Quarterly, Volume LXV, October 1952, p.42.
91 Brigadier C.N. Barclay, *Four Generations of Staff College Students, Part III: 1930, The Army Quarterly*, Volume LXV, October 1952, p.49.
92 Major D.M.A. Wedderburn, *Four Generations of Staff College Students, Part IV: 1952, The Army Quarterly*, Volume LXV, October 1952, p.52.
93 National Army Museum (NAM), Gove Papers 6308-14, Colonel T.T. Grove, Unpublished Memoir, p.29.

General by the end of the First World War. In peacetime, this provided enough trained staff officers to fill the relatively few posts available and assured a healthy competition for places. But this short-term policy relegated to regimental soldiering many talented officers, who tended to resent ambitious colleagues who attended Staff College and lacked the required training when called upon to undertake staff duties during the war. In the long-term the policy meant that there was a severe shortage of qualified staff officers during wartime when the BEF underwent enormous expansion.

Reforms at Camberley after the Boer War "made the Staff College one of the most efficient places of military education in the world"[94] and one student, who qualified in 1913, concluded that "as a result of what I had learnt at Camberley I was well equipped to deal with any situation that arose when I was a Staff Officer".[95] A relatively small group of pre-war graduates of the Staff Colleges at Camberley and Quetta held most of the key positions in the BEF. However, early in the war it quickly became apparent that, owing to a shortage of well-trained and educated officers capable of undertaking the task of managing a hugely expanded army, the BEF lacked an adequate supply of well-trained staff officers to equip the staffs of the new divisions. Camberley and Quetta together could barely accommodate a minority of officers producing only 447 Staff College graduates in the 1914 Army List.[96] Edmonds noted that "in 1914 there were very few trained staff officers, that is men who had served on the staff of a command, a division, or a brigade with troops; and of these few more than half (including the best, such as George Morris, Adrian Grant-Duff and 'Gussie' Geddes, who fell in action in 1914) were either killed or disabled in the early days".[97] The few 'educated' officers who had attended Staff College prior to the war were thinly spread as the 'brains of the army' during the war.

Another major flaw was the British Army's neglect of the operational aspects of modern war; namely the planning and staff work required for operations on a continental scale. Staff officers had little opportunity to hone their skills before the conflict began. The small size of the original BEF precluded the existence of army or corps staff; when these posts were suddenly required in wartime, many of the required duties had to be learned 'on the job'. The peacetime staff of a division consisted of a General Staff Officer, a DAAG, a CRA and a CRE with other staff only joining on mobilization or for manoeuvres and training during every summer.[98] Since peacetime

94 Churchill College Cambridge (CCC), Churchill-Bonham-Carter Papers, 9/1, General Sir Charles Bonham-Carter, Memoir, Chapter VI, pp.4-6.
95 LHCMA, Beddington Papers, Brigadier Edward Beddington, Memoirs, p.52.
96 Brian Bond, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College, 1854–1914*, (London, Eyre Metheuen, 1972) p.324.
97 LHCMA, Edmonds Papers, I/2B/5a, Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds to Brigadier C.N. Barclay, 7 April 1950.
98 TNA CAB 45/129, General Sir Thomas Snow, 'The Account of the Retreat of 1914', undated, pp.2-3.

divisions were only allowed one GSO1,[99] they relied on the allocation of additional personnel during mobilisation to ensure that they were able to go to war with a war establishment. For example, "the four additional staff officers who were, on mobilization, appointed to the 4th Division were strangers to it" and having little experience or training were unable even to write operational orders.[100]

As a result, at first, the British Army was very inexperienced at the staff work required in mass warfare. One battalion commander noted that "in the early stages of the war the Germans were better practised than were our staffs in the handling of large units".[101] During the Somme in 1916 "staff work (Divisional, Brigade, & Battalion) in the earlier stages of the battle was poor" as even "the most competent officers were working on a scale and in conditions of which they had no experience, and they had to learn their job", but in the later stages "the Staff, having had an opportunity to learn, were just beginning to take hold of their job".[102] During 1915 these problems were considerably worse as the Army rapidly expanded and the few 'educated' soldiers available were hastily promoted.

Staff officers were given a good technical training but little theoretical knowledge of how to operate formations above the divisional level. The task of the Staff College students "was to learn the arts of lubrication" as they were "to be greasers of the army machine, normal functionaries" and not "as disciples of war and of wisdom".[103] Field-Marshal Sir William Robertson, during his time as Staff College Commandant, bluntly informed his students that they "were at the Staff College to learn staff duties and to qualify for Staff Captain, not to talk irresponsible trash" on "subjects of policy or strategy".[104] One of the most able of the trained staff officers, General Sir Charles Harington (MGGS Second Army), admitted that he had not been prepared to "think in 'Armies'", having "never even in theory" contemplated the problems of commanding a force larger than the original six division BEF. Yet within less than two years of the outbreak of the war he found himself responsible for the staff work of an Army which "two or three times in tenure exceeded thirty divisions".[105] Harington blamed the British Army's many problems on the failure to develop "a General Staff 'doctrine'" in parallel to the big formations that had developed from nothing during the war. He was also critical of the inability to standardise doctrine at army, corps and divisional

99 LHCMA, Edmonds Papers, III/7/4, Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, Memoirs, Chapter XXII.
100 LHCMA, Edmonds Papers III/8/5, Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, Memoirs, Chapter XXIII.
101 TNA CAB 45/120, Lieutenant-Colonel R.R. Gibson to Edmonds, 10 August 1926.
102 TNA CAB 45/132, Pearson Choate to Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, 6 April 1936 and 26 March 1926.
103 Colonel Sir Thomas Montgomery-Cuninghame, *Dusty Measure: A Record of Troubled Times* (London, John Murray, 1930), p.50.
104 Brigadier-General A.F.U. Green, *Evening Tattoo*, (London, S.Paul, 1941), pp.32-33.
105 General Sir Charles Harington, *'Tim' Harington Looks Back*, (London, J. Murray, 1940), p.53.

With the high command summer 1915. From right to left: Lieutenant-General Sir Hubert Gough, Major-General Sir Henry Wilson, Major-General Henry Horne, Major-General Thompson Capper, General Sir Douglas Haig, Général Joseph Joffre, Field Marshal Sir John French. (Editor's collection)

level. The methods employed "varied considerably" so that "very divergent views are held and entirely different methods exist in the various Armies, Corps & Divisions".[106]

Undoubtedly a shortage of competent staff officers lowered standards, creating a Clausewitzian 'friction' where bad staff work prevented operations from being conducted successfully. One disillusioned battalion commander believed that "all the shell-shocked idiots of the British Empire were put to do staff work".[107] There were a number of reasons for such perceptions. In contrast to the large Staff Officer Corps in the German Army, which allowed all division and most regimental staff positions to

106 IWM, Maxse Papers 69/57/11, DCIGS [Major-General C.H. Harington] to CIGS [Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson], 11 July 1918.

107 TNA CAB 45/137, Lieutenant-Colonel A.J. Richardson to Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, 24 May 1930.

be held by highly trained members of this 'corps', the rapid expansion of the British Army meant that there was a severe shortage of trained staff. Many new staff officers were seconded from front-line units, due either to wounds or meritorious service. Prior to the Battle of Loos the 24th Division had "no staff officer, who had acted in that capacity with troops in the field during the war" and although "the GSOs I and II were serving regular officers, who entered on the war as regimental officers, both had been badly wounded in the first two months in France, and had spent months in hospital or convalescing". Neither "had had any opportunity of appreciating to what extent everything connected with staff work before and during battle had developed in France, since the commencement of the war".[108] Brigadier-General C.G. Stewart, the GSO1, "was not well"[109] having "been wounded in still open warfare on the Aisne and 1st Battle of Ypres" and was in hindsight "not well acquainted with what trench warfare attacks entailed".[110]

In the early years of the war this decline in standards was made worse by a rapid turnover of staff. For example in 1916, Henry Wilson (IV Corps) "lost my B[rigadie]r Gen[eral] GS, my 2nd Grade GS, my CRA, & my C[R]E & my Camp Comm[andan]t".[111] As a result, some staff officers achieved rapid promotion in the first eighteen months of the conflict. Brigadier-General John Charteris, who went from the rank of Captain in August 1914 to that of Brigadier-General in December 1915,[112] General Sir Richard Butler, who was promoted from being a Major on Smith-Dorrien's staff at Aldershot pre-war to be Chief of Staff of an Army,[113] and Brigadier-General Philip Howell, who rose from Captain to Brigadier-General in two years,[114] all attained the rank of BGGS very rapidly. General Sir John Coleridge was able to rise from GSO3 to GSO1 while serving with the 11th Division, making the transition in just over a year owing to "the death or wounding or illness of his superiors".[115]

Horne was very lucky in being given command of a Regular division, which was "a very good one", and in knowing already "all the staff" and "some of the Regiments as well".[116] Having not been to Staff College himself, Horne was heavily reliant on his staff and was fortunate in having "a good staff who know their work, which helps me so much". Clearly, Horne sought to maintain good relations with the staff working for him at the 2nd Division, telling his wife that "we are a very harmonious staff

108 TNA CAB 45/121. Brigadier-General C.G. Stewart to Edmonds, 30 November 1927.
109 TNA CAB 45/120, Brigadier-General B.R. Mitford to Edmonds, 23 January 1926.
110 TNA CAB 45/121, Brigadier-General C.G. Stewart to Major A.F. Becke, 3 August 1925.
111 IWM, Wilson Papers, Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, Diary, 24 March 1916.
112 IWM, Henderson Papers, DS/MISC/2, Lieutenant-Colonel K. Henderson, Memoirs, p.185.
113 IWM, Home Papers, 82/18/1. Brigadier-General Sir Archibald Home, Diary, 15 March 1915.
114 IWM, Woodroffe Papers, Brigadier-General C.R. Woodroffe, Diary, 22 February 1915.
115 IWM, Henderson Papers, DS/MISC/2, Henderson, Memoirs, p.152.
116 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 1 January 1915.

in the 2nd Division and we get on well together".[117] Colonel M.P.C. (later Major-General Sir Maurice) Holt (RAMC, 2nd Division) confirmed that "we are a very happy family",[118] while Lieutenant-Colonel L.R. (later Lieutenant-General Sir Louis) Vaughan (GSO1, 2nd Division) agreed that it was "more than a pleasure" to serve under Horne.[119]

On Horne's arrival the GSO1 of the division was Colonel (later Major-General Sir) Neill Malcolm, who was "such a good soldier, & such a nice man" and "a great friend" having also been with the I Corps in 1914. Malcolm had been posted to the 2nd Division temporarily and Horne had hoped that his posting would be made permanent but Malcolm soon left, ordered home to serve on the staff of a New Army division, as "the policy is to send experienced officers as they become available to teach the others at home". This was "a nuisance", but Horne felt that it was "quite right" that experienced officers should be promoted to fill the vacancies made by the formation of the New Armies.[120] However, as the British Army expanded, the constant loss of trained and established officers within the division was to become a major and recurring problem.

In February 1915 Horne complained that "we have had a regular stream of officers going to the New Armies, and I am losing a lot of valuable men, but the New Army wants them and we can get on".[121] However, by July his patience was wearing thin. The sudden loss of Brigadier-General A.A. (later Major-General Sir Arlington) Chichester (5th Brigade), Colonel (later Brigadier-General) G.D. Jebb (AA & QMG, 2nd Division), and Major J.E.S. (later General Sir John) Brind (DAA & QMG, 2nd Division) prompted him to complain that "such a number of changes all at once upset a division a good deal".[122] Horne was "sad to lose so many of one's officers", but believed that "it cannot be helped as they must have promotion".[123] Jebb and Brind were both going to better appointments and Horne, although "very sorry to part with them", realised that "it is & must be the way" that "people must pass on to better jobs" but was vexed when they were not quickly replaced.[124] Lieutenant-Colonel F.F. (later General Sir Felix) Ready (DAA & QMG, 2nd Division) observed in August 1915 that "your old Staff is sadly dispersed",[125] while Brind remarked on the effects of accumulative "changes of individuals" on the division.[126] Brind was a particular loss, being "a very nice fellow" and "a most capable" and "an excellent staff officer", whom Horne missed

117 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 2 July 1915.
118 IWM, Horne Papers, Colonel M.P.C. Holt to Mrs Horne, 25 June 1915.
119 IWM, Horne Papers, Lieutenant-Colonel L R Vaughan to Mrs Horne, 26 June 1915.
120 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 2 and 6 January 1915.
121 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 26 February 1915.
122 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 13 July 1915.
123 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 6 September 1915.
124 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 15 July 1915.
125 IWM, Horne Papers, Lieutenant-Colonel F.F. Ready to Horne, 6 August 1915.
126 IWM, Horne Papers, Major J.E.S. Brind to Horne, 8 August 1915.

"very much indeed".[127] Brind went on to become GSO1, 56th Division gaining a reputation for being "very much one of those who … made the Division what it was",[128] and "one of the most efficient staff officers in the whole Army".[129]

Malcolm's replacement as GSO1 was Lieutenant-Colonel (later Colonel) H.E. Gogarty (Worcestershire Regiment), who had attended Staff College and, as a musketry expert, had been second in command at the School of Musketry at Hythe. Gogarty seemed to be "a nice fellow" and had the reputation of being "a good man" and "very capable" so Horne was hopeful that he would "be of great help",[130] but he proved unequal to the task and was quickly replaced by the GSO2, Major L.R. Vaughan (7th Gurkhas, psc), in February 1915. A "charming man, with his professional manner, sweetness of speech, gentleness of voice and gesture, like an Oxford Don analysing the war correspondence of Xenophon",[131] Louis Vaughan was "a real good fellow",[132] and "a very good" staff officer, who was "grateful" to Horne who had "pushed him on" for the post of GSO1 despite being "rather junior". Horne, in turn, was "grateful to him" and had "complete confidence in him", noting that "we get on well together", as he was "an excellent Staff Officer", being "very clear headed, sensible", "an excellent organizer", and able to "work night & day if required".[133] When Vaughan was in England on leave Horne admitted to missing him "very much".[134]

Vaughan in turn was replaced as GSO2 by Major (later Brigadier-General) F.A. Buzzard (RA, psc), who also left in July 1915 to become GSO1, 9th Division and was replaced by Major (later Lieutenant-Colonel) J.D. Belgrave (RA, psc). An indication of the shortage of staff officers during this period of expansion for the BEF is the fact that Buzzard was appointed as GSO1 "although he had been a failure as GSO2 with 2nd Division". Not surprisingly, he proved to be "indifferent" and had to be replaced,[135] and was returned to regimental duties after only two months in the post. Major (later Brigadier-General) C.F. Watson (Royal West Surrey Regiment, psc) was GSO3, 2nd Division from November 1914 until February 1915 when he left to become GSO2 of a New Army Division in the UK. He was replaced by Captain M.O. Clarke (Royal Fusiliers, psc), who left for VI Corps in June 1915 and was in turn replaced by Captain E.H. Davidson (Gordon Highlanders), who was the younger brother of Major-General Sir John Davidson (Haig's Head of Operations at GHQ, 1916-18) and, as Horne noted, seemed "a nice fellow & knows my family in different

127 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 22 August and 16 October 1915.
128 TNA CAB 45/137, Lieutenant-Colonel R. Shoolbred to Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, 11 June 1929.
129 General Sir George Barrow, *The Fire of Life*, (London, Hutchinson & Co, 1942), p.157.
130 Horne Papers, IWM. Horne to his wife, 2 4, and 6 January 1915.
131 Sir Philip Gibbs, *The Realities of War*, (London, W.Henermann, 1920) p.397.
132 IWM, Kirke Papers, General Sir Walter Kirke to his wife, 13 April 1917.
133 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 29 June 1915.
134 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 15 July 1915.
135 TNA WO 265/5, Field-Marshal Earl Haig, Diary, 29 August and 2 September 1915.

ways".[136] Both Watson and Clarke eventually became GSO1 of divisions in 1916 and 1918 respectively.

On the Administrative Staff Lieutenant-Colonel Gwynned Conway Gordon was replaced as AA & QMG in February 1915 by Lieutenant-Colonel Jebb, who was later replaced in July 1915 by Lieutenant-Colonel (later Brigadier-General) S.W. Robinson, who had been DAA & QMG with the Indian Corps. Meanwhile, Brind, holding the post of DAA & QMG, left in July to become GSO2, X Corps, while Lieutenant-Colonel Ready, a "cunning" officer,[137] who was "a great loss",[138] left in June to become AA & QMG, 4th Division. Conway Gordon (ASC) went on to become Deputy Director of Transport in February 1916 and Assistant Director of Supplies and Transport in November 1916, being Mentioned in Despatches and awarded the CBE before retiring in 1919. Jebb went on to become AQMG (July 1915) and DA & QMG at X Corps (December 1915) and then XV Corps (December 1916) but then took up posts as DA & QMG in the UK from June 1917. Robinson was promoted as DA & QMG, XIII Corps in October 1916, holding the appointment until August 1919. Ready lived up to Horne's judgement of his abilities by becoming DA & QMG, I Corps in May 1916 and later Deputy Adjutant-General in Mesopotamia from August 1916 until May 1919.

The above paragraphs give some impression of the turnover rate amongst staff officers, even in a highly regarded Regular formation such as Horne's 2nd Division. Beyond the obvious detriment to overall effectiveness, this 'churn' of experienced officers made it impossible to create a consistent school of thought within the division. It took time for new officers to establish working relationships with their subordinates, peers and superiors, but the frequent shifts in personnel frequently broke up the staff just as they becoming experienced in their duties. The constant process of reorganisation slowed the learning process and created a great deal of unfortunate 'friction' in the operation of divisions, corps and even armies.

The loss of valuable men and the rapid turn-over of personnel on the staff was mirrored by the loss of many good battlefield commanders. For example, the division lost Brigadier-General (later Major-General Sir Edward) E.M. Percival who was replaced as BGRA,[139] on taking up an appointment at GHQ, and would be "much missed".[140] He was replaced on 1 February 1915 by Brigadier-General W.H. (later Major-General Sir William) Onslow, who did "well",[141] worked "very hard" and was "always energetic & cheery".[142] Onslow was promoted to XI Corps in early September, and was in turn replaced by Brigadier-General G.H. Sanders, "a very

136 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 17 June 1915.
137 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 3 May 1915.
138 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 30 May 1915.
139 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 26 January 1915.
140 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 26 January 1915.
141 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 6 September 1915.
142 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 21 February 1915.

good man indeed".[143] Each brigade also saw changes in command. Brigadier-General Fanshawe (6th Brigade), who was promoted to Major-General, left to command the 48th Division.[144] He was "a great loss as he was very excellent" but Horne was glad that he had "got his reward", especially as his successor was Brigadier-General (later Major-General) A.C. Daly, who was "a good fellow".[145] In May 1915, Brigadier-General (later Field-Marshal) the Earl of Cavan (4th Guards Brigade), the Master of the Hertfordshire Hounds, who was "a most excellent commander & a very nice man indeed",[146] in whom Horne had "perfect confidence",[147] was replaced by Brigadier-General G.P.T. (later Major-General Sir Geoffrey) Feilding, "a very good man" who had commanded the 3rd Coldstreams.[148] Feilding had left to take command of the 149th Brigade (50th (Northumbrian) Division), when its previous commander, Brigadier-General J.F. Riddell, was killed at Second Ypres on 26 April 1915.[149] Of Cavan, Horne noted that:

> I am delighted that he should be promoted. No man has deserved it better. He has done splendid work, but I lose a very brilliant Brigadier and a personal friend. I have been surprised that he has not been promoted before, but there was some trouble over his having been on the retired list when the war broke out. He is sorry to leave us, I think. We get however an excellent man in his place – Colonel Fielding [*sic*] – who commanded the 3rd Coldstream Guards until quite a short time ago when he went to a territorial brigade. I am glad to get him back.[150]

Chichester (5th Brigade) was replaced by Brigadier-General C.E. (later Major-General Sir Charles) Corkran in July 1915. Uniquely the CRE, Lieutenant-Colonel (later Brigadier-General) G.P. Scholfield, remained in post throughout Horne's tenure of command.

There was also the toll of heavy casualties, especially at the regimental level. Horne mourned the "very great loss" of two "good friends", Major Shakerley (1st KRRC) and Colonel Wilfred R.A. Smith (2nd Grenadiers), "such a nice gentleman, and good soldier" for whom Horne "had a tremendous regard".[151] Horne also attended the funeral of Captain Brabazon (Coldstream Guards), one of the Earl of Meath's sons who had served on the staff of the 4th Brigade – "such a nice fellow and [a] good officer" whom he had got to know "very well during the war", lamenting that

143 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 8 September 1915.
144 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 30 May 1915.
145 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 30 May 1915.
146 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 11 January 1915.
147 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 16 January 1915.
148 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 2 July 1915.
149 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary Book No.1, 27 April 1915.
150 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 28 June 1915.
151 IWM, Horne Papers, General Lord Horne to his wife, 27 May 1915.

"too many friends pass on".[152] During the Battle of Loos Horne "lost a fine battalion commander", a "charming man" and "a personal friend", who was "a great loss to the Army & to the division and to all his friends", when Colonel C.G. 'Andrew' Hill DSO (1st Royal Berkshires) was killed.[153]

Taken as a whole, by mid-1915 the expertise of the division's staff and commanders had been seriously depleted, partially through battlefield action, but primarily through the constant demand for experienced officers to take posts at new formations. This undoubtedly had an effect on the performance of the 2nd Division, which in turn is reflective of the overall performance of the BEF during 1915. There was no substitute for experience.

Nevertheless, despite these problems 2nd Division was adjudged to have conducted itself well in the battles fought by First Army during early 1915. In particular, 2nd Division's daring night attack at the Battle of Festubert caught the eye of Horne's superiors.[154] In June 1915 Sir Charles Monro (I Corps) informed Horne that "he considered the 2nd Division to be in a very highly efficient state & that he had reported accordingly".[155] In July 1915, Haig informed Prime Minister Herbert Asquith of the "necessity for promoting young officers to high command" and intimated that "to make room, some of the old ones must be removed". Looking through the lists of Major-Generals in the Army list for "young, capable officers", Haig endorsed "in order of seniority" Morland, Horne, Gough and Haking for command of corps believing that "they should eventually be given command of armies".[156] Of the four generals mentioned all were commanding corps by the end of 1915 but only Gough and Horne were to be promoted to command Armies during 1916. Haig himself "recommended Haking and Horne to be given Corps" in August 1915.[157] Aware that he was "well thought of", Horne was confident as regards his prospects for command of a corps because:

> General Haig is backing me up for one, and he told me today not to be "down-hearted" if I did not get one at once, as there are at least two before me with superior claims on account of seniority. I fancy I am third for one. That is not so bad for a gunner, my darling, who is not a staff college man! There are sure to be at least two appointed shortly in connection with the Kitchener armies so that would leave me very near.[158]

152 IWM, Horne Papers, General Lord Horne to his wife, 18 June 1915.
153 IWM, Horne Papers, General Lord Horne to his wife, 28 June 1915.
154 For further details on this action, see Robert Williams's chapter on the Battle of Festubert elsewhere in this volume.
155 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 25 June 1915.
156 TNA WO 256/5, Field-Marshal Earl Haig, Diary, 8 July 1915.
157 TNA WO 256/5, Field-Marshal Earl Haig, Diary, 16 August 1915.
158 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 29 August 1915.

Indeed, when somewhat prematurely in early September 1915, his wife received many letters of congratulation referring mistakenly to her husband's promotion to a Corps (some even naming XI Corps),[159] and he was himself congratulated by his fellow gunner, Brigadier-General F R (later Sir Francis) Bingham,[160] Horne reiterated that:

> There are two before me but I know that there was great discussion whether I should not be preferred to one of them, and between ourselves I think from what he said that General Haig backed me. However I shall have a chance before very long again, no doubt, unless I make some mistake or do something wrong! It is complimentary to think that I have come so near it, and also to know that many would like me to have it, for I do know that. Tommy Capper will get one of the next two, and Haking the other. They are both older soldiers than I am & Staff College graduates & have held many staff appointments. I, on the other hand, have not had the same advantages & I really feel very pleased to think that I am even considered for so high a command![161]

Major-General R.C.B. (later General Sir Richard) Haking was indeed given command of the XI Corps prior to the Battle of Loos, while Major-General Sir Thompson Capper was unfortunately killed while commanding the 7th Division before he could take over command of a corps. Horne remained sanguine as he had spoken to Douglas Haig, who assured him that he would "get one of the next ones, perhaps the 13th",[162] and to Major-General Lambton (Military Secretary at GHQ), who "conveyed to me that there was every chance" of getting a corps "before very long".[163]

Events were to take a turn, however, which were to jeopardise Horne's ambitions. In July 1915, when meeting Lord Kitchener in London Horne had been "warned to be ready for Dardanelles",[164] but was then reassured that he was "not for Dardanelles".[165] When Major-General F.J. 'Joey' (later General Sir Francis) Davies (8th Division) "was hurried off at the shortest notice to go to the Dardanelles" at the end of the month, Horne was "very glad" for his wife's sake that he "was not ordered off there", as "it would have been a great trial".[166] Following the failure of the landings at Suvla Bay Kitchener immediately intervened to replace those generals who had not been successful with younger men and telegraphed General Sir Ian Hamilton on 14 August

159 IWM, Horne Papers, Lady Horne to Horne, 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 September 1915.
160 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 3 September 1915.
161 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 1 September 1915.
162 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 6 September 1915.
163 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 9 September 1915.
164 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 26 July 1915.
165 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 27 July 1915.
166 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 30 July 1915.

that he was asking Sir John French in France "to supply one Corps Commander and two Divisional Generals, real fighters", suggesting Byng (Cavalry Corps), Horne (2nd Division) and Kavanagh (5th Division), who were "all good fighting men". Hamilton agreed that they were "all fliers" and two days later was "enchanted" to hear that Byng, Major-General F.S. (later Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick) Maude (recovering from wounds) and Major-General E.A. Fanshawe (31st Division in the UK) were being sent instead,[167] to take over IX Corps, 11th and 13th Divisions respectively. Kavanagh and Horne remained in France and Horne reported that "Lord K's attempt to get me for the Dardanelles" had been foiled.[168]

However, on 4 November, having just returned to Bethune from leave, Horne "received telegraphic orders at 7.30 pm to report to Lord K in Paris tomorrow morning with 1 ADC, probable absence one month".[169] These orders "arrived as a thunder bolt" to Horne, who, while flattered to be sent for by Kitchener for "a special mission", was "sad to leave the division", and, above all, anxious that his command of the 2nd Division should "be kept open" during his absence.[170] Command of 2nd Division was given temporarily to Brigadier-General (later Major-General) W.G. Walker (Sirhind Brigade) during his absence and Horne "squared Gough and also asked Douglas Haig to look out that my place is not permanently filled up during my absence, as I do not wish to hand over my beloved division until I do so to go to a higher command".[171]

Horne had been selected to accompany Lord Kitchener "on a tour round the Mediterranean" as "a General with experience both of artillery and infantry fighting" in France.[172] In the next two months in "a remarkable performance" Horne would serve "in 'Greek Macedonia, Serbia, Bulgaria, European Turkey, and the Islands of Aegean Sea'", finally ending up in Egypt,[173] participating in the evacuation of the Gallipoli peninsula, the Allied intervention at Salonika, and the defence of the Suez Canal. Horne's hopes of returning to his division on the Western Front were dashed when on 27 December 1915 he received orders to return to Egypt as a Corps Commander.[174] In Egypt Horne faced an uncertain future away from the Western Front and his patron, Haig, to whom he owed his advancement during the first year of war. Horne received letters from Colonel Vaughan and other officers of the 2nd Division "regretting my departure which is kind of them and which I much appreciate", and he wrote back to Vaughan and the brigadiers of the 2nd Division "to bid them *au revoir*", feeling

167 Sir George Arthur, *Life of Lord Kitchener*, Volume III, (London, Macmillan, 1920), p.170.
168 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 29 August 1915.
169 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 4 November 1915.
170 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 4 November 1915.
171 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 6 November 1915.
172 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 5 November 1915.
173 Major-General Sir H Uniacke, 'General the Lord Horne of Stirkoke', *Journal of the Royal Artillery*, October 1929, p.6.
174 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne, Diary, 27 December 1915, Horne Papers, IWM.

"pleased that the division regrets my leaving them" and grateful that they had "all served me very loyally & truly and declaring that he had "a great affection for them".[175] Frustratingly, Horne would not return to France until April 1916, arriving just in time to take part in the Somme offensive.[176]

175 IWM, Horne Papers, Horne to his wife, 2 January 1916.
176 IWM, Horne Papers, General Lord Horne to his wife, 11 April 1916.

5

The BEF Takes Off: The Royal Flying Corps in 1915

Peter Hart

In the beginning there was the ground war.

By the end of 1914 the armies had disappeared into trenches. The initial tentative scrapings had been deepened and extended until a nigh-on unbroken front was created. At first both sides were confident that these trenches were temporary resting places. They girded their metaphorical loins for the next great attack that would surely rupture the enemy's line, allowing a resumption of old-style open warfare, culminating in a satisfying advance to victory towards Berlin – or Paris – depending on perspective. In December 1914, the French had already embarked on two offensives with hundreds of thousands of troops backed up by some 700 guns. On 17 December, the Tenth Army in the Artois region pushed forward in an attempt to control the heights of the Vimy Ridge that dominated the Lens-Douai plain. Further south, the Fourth Army launched an offensive in the Champagne area on 20 December. The early graft in developing feasible assault techniques in trench warfare was left almost entirely to the French. They adopted a preliminary barrage to cut the German barbed wire, followed by a bombardment of the trenches after which the infantry attacked in waves. Minor gains were made, but the French failed to break through the German lines. The fighting was markedly attritional, as tactically significant terrain features were captured, lost to German counter-attacks, regained at more cost in lives – and then lost again.

Trench warfare would prove an intractable problem for which pre-war experience was to prove of little value. The French attacks defined the problem neatly: it seemed that it was possible to break *into* a trench system, but not to break *through*. Whatever gains that might be made from the first assaults were excruciatingly vulnerable to German counter-attacks. The ultimate answer would be the 'All Arms' tactics that would sweep the Allies to victory in 1918. But that synthesis of infantry, powerful infantry-support weapons, artillery, gas shells, aircraft, tanks, light tanks and cavalry was years away.

Back in August 1914, the hopes of the British generals had rested four-square on the traditional arms: infantry, cavalry and artillery. It may be considered that in the early battles of 1914 that the BEF had not even mastered the coordinated usage of

artillery to the best advantage. There was a widespread failure to understand that the *shell* not the gun was the weapon. The field artillery did not have to be close by the infantry, they could be held further back and use the techniques of indirect fire to bring their shells down 'out of nowhere' onto unsuspecting German targets. The problem lay in achieving accuracy against targets out of visible range. The solution would lie in the form of a new technology – the aircraft.

There had already been movement towards exploiting the potential of military aviation. The first powered flight had been made in 1903, yet within ten years both aircraft and airships had been incorporated into the armed services with the formation of Royal Flying Corps (RFC) in 1912. Although there was an awareness that the technology was at an early stage and that aircraft were still unreliable in all but the mildest weather conditions, it was still evident that the army was closely monitoring advances in aviation. The initial priority was to develop an aerial reconnaissance role as demonstrated in the army manoeuvres held in September 1912. Afterwards, Lieutenant-General Sir James Grierson paid tribute to the role of aircraft.

> The impression left on my mind is that their use has revolutionised the art of war. So long as hostile aircraft are hovering over one's troops all movements are liable to be seen and reported, and therefore the first step in war will be to get rid of the hostile aircraft. He who does this first or who keeps the last aeroplane afloat will win, other things being approximately equal.[1]

Even then, Grierson foresaw the implicit need for dedicated fighter aircraft to bring down opposing reconnaissance aircraft.

Interest was not limited to senior generals. Many junior officers were busy exploring the numerous military possibilities of aviation, including the potential of wireless communications, aerial photography, carrying a worthwhile payload of bombs, arming aircraft with machine guns and artillery observation. Captain Sefton Brancker, an artillery officer, flew on numerous trial flights to try and discover the best means of communication between the artillery observer in the sky and the gunners on the ground.

> Experiments were carried out from Larkhill in observation of artillery fire, and I was nominated one of the observers. Our two great difficulties were first to persuade the artillery to treat us seriously, and secondly, to communicate with them. There was never any difficulty in actual observation in the ideal conditions which prevailed on Salisbury Plain. But our progress was slow, for on account of bad weather and shortage of machines we did not accomplish much flying. We started by trying to drop messages to the battery commander, but this method was far too clumsy and slow, except as a means of indicating where the target was. Smoke puffs, lamps

1 J. Grierson quoted by W. Raleigh, *The War in the Air, Vol. 1* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1922), pp.226-227.

> and other forms of visual signalling were suggested and tried, I remember General Rawlinson being much impressed by our ability to locate targets, but this was about as far as we got, and I fear the results of these experiments only made the conservative gunners still more sceptical of the value of aviation to them. It was obvious then that the ideal method of communication between the air and the ground must be wireless, and at that early date they were already experimenting with the very cumbersome and unreliable wireless sets which then existed.[2]

On the outbreak of war, Brigadier-General David Henderson[3] was appointed to command the RFC in the field which would initially consist of the headquarters, four aeroplane squadrons and an aircraft park to act as a mobile base for the supply and repair of the front line units.

In the early weeks of the war the RFC was mainly concerned with reconnaissance. They observed much of interest as to German movements, but discovered that even accurate intelligence was irrelevant if it was ignored. It caused great frustration amongst young pilots that reports that disagreed with the preconceptions of Sir John French were treated with considerable scepticism before the Battle of Mons on 23 August. Following that debacle aerial observation was treated with more respect and the reports of British and French aviators were of immense value to General Joseph Joffre during the planning and execution of the Battle of the Marne.

It was with the onset of trench warfare on the Aisne in September 1914 that the RFC began to carve out a vital new role. The British lines were under intensive shell fire from heavy German batteries which were invisible to the British gunners and their observers in the front line. Something had to be done.

> They have 8-inch guns which fire an enormous shell, 2 foot 11 inch long. Yesterday they knocked out one of our howitzer batteries in about 3 minutes, German aeroplanes signalling to direct the fire of the batteries. Some better cooperation between our flying men and the batteries is necessary and we are trying to work this up.[4]
>
> Lieutenant Colonel Stanley Maude, Headquarters, III Corps

There were several technical questions that had to be answered before airmen could achieve their potential for aerial observation and artillery ranging. Yet war is a

2 W. S. Brancker quoted by N. Macmillan, *Sir Sefton Brancker* (London: William Heinemann, 1935), pp.52-53.

3 For details of Henderson as commander of the RFC, see James Pugh, 'David Henderson and Command of the Royal Flying Corps' in Spencer Jones (ed.), *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914* (Solihull, Helion & Co., 2013).

4 F. S. Maude quoted by A. Syk, *The Military Papers of Lieutenant General Stanley Maude, 1914-1917* (Stroud: History Press/Army Records Society, 2012), pp.34-35.

marvellous catalyst and already the first steps were being taken that would make the RFC absolutely indispensable to the Royal Artillery for the rest of the war.

The RFC possessed the capability to fly over the German trenches to record on a map the exact position of German batteries. Once this was passed to the Royal Artillery, the gunners could work out the angle and range to the target. Although the existing maps were not accurate enough to allow for precision shooting 'off the map', the gunners could at least get their shells into the general locality of German batteries. The next step was for the pilots and observers to use a simple system of firing Very lights to allow corrections to the fall of shot as the guns were actually in action.

> We located exactly the positions of two batteries. On our information the 60-pounders were told to shell these batteries and we went up again to direct their fire and get them on with Very light signals. Just as we were going over the guns and all ready to observe the engine started missing badly, also Walker found that his Very pistol had jammed. So down we came again to put things right. We then went up to try again with much better success. We got our battery onto them and our shells were just right, and I think we must have paid them back for the bad time they have been giving our troops.[5]
>
> Lieutenant William Read, 3 Squadron, RFC

Simultaneously there were experiments to get a wireless transmitter up aloft. This would allow Morse code signal corrections sent back directly to the British batteries. The first wireless artillery observation flight was undertaken on 18 September 1914 by Lieutenants Donald Lewis and Baron James of 4 Squadron, RFC. This was not a sophisticated matter, as can be seen by the transcript of their messages for a mission conducted a few days later.

4.2pm	A very little short. Fire. Fire.
4.4pm	Fire again. Fire again.
4.12pm	A little short; line O.K.
4.15pm	Short. Over, over and a little left.
4.20pm	You were just between two batteries. Search 200 yards each side of your last shot. Range O.K.
4.22pm	You have them.
4.26pm	Hit. Hit. Hit.
4.3 pm	About 50 yards short and to the right.
4.37pm	Your last shot in the middle of three batteries in action; search all round within 300 yards of your last shot and you have them.
4.42pm	I am coming home now.[6]

5 IWM DOCS: W. Read, transcript diary, 25/9/1914.
6 Raleigh, *War in the Air, Vol. I*, p.341.

There were many problems to be overcome, but the process had begun.

Artillery observation would move on apace during 1915, with the eventual introduction of the Sterling radio which weighed about 20 pounds and could be easily carried aloft. A new set of squared maps was lettered and numbered so that any point on the ground could be clearly and quickly identified. A code was developed based on the concept of a 'clock'. The target was considered to be at the junction of the hands and twelve o'clock always pointed true-north. From this starting point the relative position of each shot could be accurately communicated to the gunners once the observer in the sky saw the fall of the shells.

> The system of correcting faults was this. You had imaginary circles drawn round the target, 25 yards, 50 yards, 150, 200, 250, 300, 350, 400 – and you had a simple letter and figure code to indicate two things: the clock-face point at which the shells were falling, in other words whether they were falling at one o'clock or three o'clock from the target; and the distance as expressed in the imaginary circles which you visualised without much difficulty. With a good battery – batteries varied enormously – you should get them right on target at about the third salvo.[7]
>
> Captain Archibald James, 16 Squadron, RFC

In 1915 many of the Royal Artillery batteries were still very inexperienced and sometimes corrections were either inaccurately applied or, worse still, ignored. It would be a long time before the majority of Royal Artillery officers realised that these new methods of registering their guns were not just an optional extra, but would form an integral part of their daily operational routine.

The RFC also made great progress in the use of cameras to record what the pilots could see over the German lines. The first photographic reconnaissance was undertaken on 15 September 1914 by Lieutenant George Pretyman and Sergeant Frederick Laws of 3 Squadron, RFC. The results were blurred, but once the idea had taken hold, it was merely a matter of resolving the theory of focus and shutter speed, coupled with the practical necessities of sourcing the right kind of camera and lens, and actually fitting it to the aircraft to best effect. On the ground photographic laboratory facilities had to be created to develop the photos and ensure the rapid dissemination of prints to the relevant headquarters.

Within months the RFC could provide the army with pin-sharp glass plate photos that helped reveal what the Germans were doing beyond the veil of the front lines. In particular, photographs taken from directly above at a constant height and vertical alignment could be patched together to create a mosaic-map of the whole front line area. The nascent science of photographic interpretation was able to tease out the position of German field headquarters, machine gun posts, dugouts, support/reserve

7 IWM: James, Reel 13.

lines and – most crucial of all – gun batteries. Repeated sets of photos allowed them to track changes.

Lieutenant Archibald James left an account indicating the nature of early aerial photography in the air.

> We used a big, heavy, clumsy box camera. You exposed the prints by pulling a slide away and changed them by hand. You had the camera on your knee and on either side of your cockpit you had a little canvas bag. You yelled at the pilot when you were going to take a photograph so he kept the machine quite level and didn't tilt the angle of the camera. One took photographs through a circular hole cut in the floor. It was quite a difficult job because first of all you had to look through the hole to see the target you were photographing. Then you lost sight of it as you put the camera in position between your knees and pressed the trigger to take the photograph. One only took about six plates which one had to change by hand. On landing one took them straight to Moore-Brabazon's office where they were developed. One waited there because 'Brab' might wish to make comments on the fact that one had been inaccurate in one's pointing of the camera.[8]
>
> Lieutenant Archibald James, 16 Squadron, RFC

By such means, building upon the increasingly systematic French contemporaneous experiments, a photographic 'map' could be produced of the German trench system, with the identified German strongpoints and batteries then traced on to 1:8,000 and 1:5,000 maps.

A further long-range strategic reconnaissance role for the RFC had been developed to detect and record German troop movements in military centres, or on roads and railways, well behind the lines. The appearance of new camps, supply dumps or airfields would indicate that trouble was brewing in a specific sector. Such missions could also allow commanders to monitor and predict the likely arrival time of German reserves during a British attack.

The first real test of the augmented role of the RFC took place at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle on 10 March 1915.[9] This British attempt to break out of the straitjacket of trench warfare was made by the First Army commanded by General Sir Douglas Haig. Haig liaised closely with Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Trenchard commanding the 1st Wing attached to First Army. Trenchard left an account of their briefing meeting on 16 February.

> I tried to explain what I thought they would do in future besides reconnaissance work, how our machines would have to fight in the air against German machines and how we should have to develop machine guns and bombs. He was interested.

8 IWM Sound Archive: A. W. H. James, AC 00024, Reel 2.
9 For further details of this operation, see Patrick Watt's chapter elsewhere in this volume.

> Then he said he was going to tell me something that only three or four people in the world yet knew; in March, somewhere in the vicinity of Merville and Neuve Chapelle, we were to launch an attack on the Germans. I was not to tell anybody. He asked: 'What will you be able to do?' I explained rather badly about artillery observation, reporting to gun batteries by Morse and signal lamps, and of our early efforts to get wireless going. On the map I showed him the position of my squadrons and said what their several tasks could be. When I'd finished he said: 'Well Trenchard, I shall expect you to tell me before the attack whether you can fly, because on your being able to observe for the artillery, and carry out reconnaissance, the battle will partly depend. If you can't fly because of the weather, I shall probably put off the attack.[10]

This may have rather gilded the lily, for there is no doubt that Trenchard was flattered to have been granted this audience. Haig's account is rather less dramatic, "I told him the plan and asked for his proposals as to disposal of aeroplanes for reconnaissance and also for artillery observation."[11] Yet Haig did build upon the pioneering work of the RFC, incorporating them into the overall plan and his diary entry a few days later showed that he had indeed been paying attention.

> At 10am I motored to Merville and held conference there regarding plans for offensive. I went into the plans sent in at some length, and insisted on the necessity or methodical preparation, and that every individual man should know exactly what his task was. Thanks to the wonderful map of Enemy's trenches which we now had as the result of airplane reconnaissance it was now possible to make our plans very carefully beforehand.[12]

These first steps established a close association between Haig and Trenchard that would endure for the whole war and indeed came to define the relationship between the RFC and the BEF as a whole. From this moment onwards air operations would be fundamental to every major offensive. Reconnaissance and artillery observation became the prime motivation behind RFC operations and eventually there would be hundreds of "corps aircraft"- their generic term – engaged on these missions.

During the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, the RFC reconnaissance and artillery observation roles were performed to considerable effect, justifying Trenchard's prior claims. A detailed map was created revealing all the German trench system and hundreds of copies were supplied for the units going over the top. Key targets had been identified and were heavily shelled in the preliminary bombardment, including an attempt to register and destroy all identified German batteries.

10 H. M. Trenchard quoted by A. Boyle, *Trenchard* (London, Collins, 1962), p.128.
11 D. Haig diary entry 16/2/1915, quoted by G. Sheffield & J. Bourne (eds.) *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-18* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p.101.
12 D. Haig diary entry 22/2/1915 in Sheffield & Bourne (eds.) *Douglas Haig*, p.102.

Neuve Chapelle also saw an attempt to develop the concept of interdiction bombing. Attacks were planned against German railheads to delay or prevent the arrival of German reserves to the threatened area. Determined efforts were made, but little of real note was achieved. Much more had to be done before RFC bombing raids could pose a serious threat to the Germans. The will and intent were there, but there were too few aircraft, the bombsights were rudimentary and the aircraft were physically unable to carry a bomb load heavy enough to inflict any serious damage in 1915. Ideas of effective interdiction attacks or the strategic bombing of factories remained little more than pipedreams.

In essence, the RFC would be the handmaiden of the Royal Artillery whose guns and howitzers were far more capable of wreaking terrible destruction than random bombing. The potential of the two arms working in harmony was increasingly recognised. Indeed, when proposals by the Directorate of Aeronautics for an additional fifty RFC squadrons came before Kitchener he brusquely doubled it at a stroke.

However, the utter confusion in command and control that followed the initial advance during the Battle of Neuve Chapelle led to the exploration of another function for the RFC in battle. It was evident that once battle began, the 'fog of war' descended on the generals and their staff as telephone lines and other means of communications with the forward troops were severed. Aircraft offered a potential means of establishing where exactly troops had reached, thus allowing – a chance at least – for some element of command to be re-established in the timely direction of reserves to identified areas of weakness – or opportunity – as desired.

Early attempts to perform what would be known as "contact patrols" occurred during the Second Battle of Ypres. On 22 April 1915, the German attack augmented by the release of a cloud of chlorine gas had produced an indescribably chaotic situation. In the days that followed it was essential to fix the location of the fluctuating British, French and German front lines in an effort to bring sense to the position. Captain Lanoe Hawker carried out a contact patrol on 25 April over Langemarck, and found from bitter experience that at any great altitude it was almost impossible to see what was happening, while at lower altitudes one was vulnerable to ground fire.

> We still clung on to that part of St Julien S.E. of the stream which seemed to be forming our line of resistance at the moment. From here the line went N.E. again and I had a very careful look at that bit of ground, circling and going over it again and again till I could make sure of the exact positions we held. It was while flying low over a big farm to the north of this bit that I received a bullet just above my left ankle that solved the problem as to who held the farm! It was remarkably painful at first and I headed for home, but as I could use my foot I turned back to deny the Germans the satisfaction of having driven me off, placed the farm carefully on the map and then turned and went home.[13]
>
> Captain Lanoe Hawker, 6 Squadron, RFC

13 L. Hawker quoted by T. Hawker, *Hawker V.C.* (London: Mitre Press, 1965), p.98.

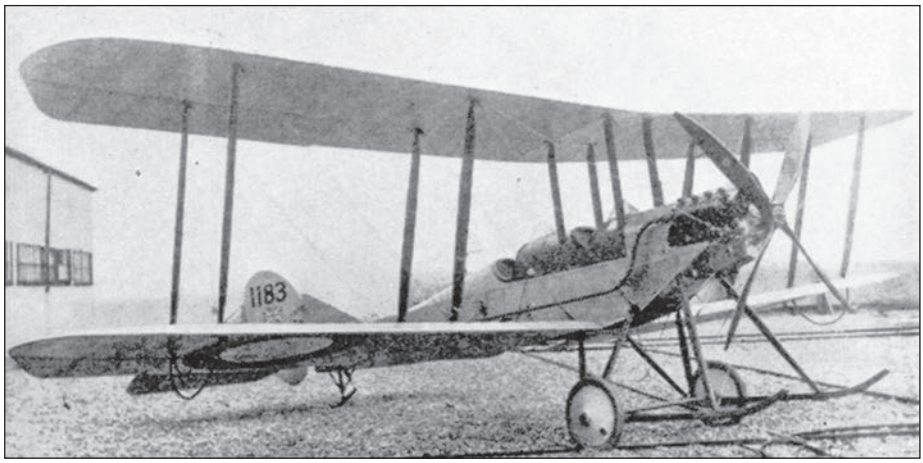
These high risk methods were obviously no good and the impetus moved to finding a method of the troops marking their positions on the ground without rendering themselves equally visible to the Germans. In the Battle of Aubers Ridge on 9 May, contact patrols equipped with a wireless were sent out looking for the white linen strips which would be laid out by the infantry. In addition, four ground wireless stations had been set up to despatch their messages to First Wing Headquarters. Captain Archibald James was one of the pilots up on patrol.

> I was sent to observe the progress of the battle, so far as I could from 5,000 feet or so. It had been arranged that in order to let the air see how far they'd got, the most advanced troops would from time to time put out white strips of cloth about 8 feet long and a foot wide.[Actually 7 x 2 foot] To my astonishment when I arrived with almost the first light, the whole of the battle front was covered with white strips. What in fact had happened was that the methodical Germans had lined their trenches with wooden boards. Our bombardment when it hit a trench blew out a number of planks, which scattered round and were quite indistinguishable from the white strips the troops were supposed to have put out.[14]
>
> Captain Archibald James, 16 Squadron, RFC

In the event, German resistance at Aubers Ridge was so fierce that the infantry had failed to reach any of the designated points where they were to display their signals. This would be the first of many such difficulties in establishing an effective methodology for the successful contact patrol. There would be further disappointments during subsequent experiments, such as using Bangalore flares, or glinting triangles carried on the soldiers' backs. It was evident that the infantry were often far too busy fighting the Germans to put out the markers, or sometimes the markers were out, but the position had already been re-captured. Even when airmen could determine what was really happening on the ground it was difficult to get that information back swiftly to the relevant headquarters. All in all, there was much scope for confusion and contact patrols remained very much a work in progress until far later in the war.

The rapid wartime expansion envisioned for the RFC had required a concentration on the manufacture of one particular aircraft to facilitate both the training of air crew and the efficient development of the embryonic aircraft industry in Britain. The aircraft selected was the BE2 series of aircraft developed by the Royal Aircraft Factory and large orders were placed. This was a stable two-seater "tractor" aircraft (engine and propeller at the front), with the latest BE2c version powered by a new 90-horsepower engine which increased both aerial performance and the load that could be carried.

14 IWM: James, Reel 5.



A British B.E.2c. The stability of the aircraft in flight made it ideal for reconnaissance and artillery observation, but proved a serious weakness in aerial combat. (Editor's Collection)

> It was recognised that pilots had got to be trained quickly and would not have a great deal of experience and so an aircraft was needed which would be simple to fly and between them they produced the BE2c. The BE2c was the first aircraft that was to be really inherently stable. The dihedral on the wings gave it lateral stability; the dihedral at which the tail plane was set in relation to the main planes gave it fore and aft stability. The lateral stability was very strong indeed – it would correct anything by itself. A very stable aircraft – as the machine wanted to stay on a level keel, right way up, it was very difficult to make it do anything else.[15]
>
> Lieutenant Charles Chabot, 4 Squadron, RFC

The selection of the BE2c was a major decision that would 'fix' the main type of corps aircraft for nearly two years. No one had really considered whether the aircraft could be defended in action – the focus was to secure an efficient platform for reconnaissance and artillery observation.

As the aerial war moved onwards and upwards it was becoming evident that – as Grierson had predicted in 1912 – neither side could allow the other side to dominate the air. They feared the advantages their adversaries would gain, and the concomitant opportunities that they themselves would lose. This meant that both sides needed some method of shooting down the reconnaissance and artillery observation aircraft of their opponents.

15 IWM Sound Archive: C. J. Chabot, AC 00008, Reel 4.

Anti-aircraft guns were an obvious riposte and had already made their appearance on both sides in 1914. Although the shells rarely scored a direct hit, as the guns increased in number they became gradually more threatening as they could generate an aerial barrage of exploding shells, a real danger to low-flying aircraft required to fly in straight – and therefore predictable – lines in the course of their photographic recce flights.

> Going north at 8,000 feet over Violanes I heard a c-r-r-r-mp, then another, and another, and looking above me saw several balls of white smoke floating away. The pilot turned to mislead 'Archie', of whom I was having my first bad experience. However, I can honestly say that I did not feel any more than a certain curiosity as to where the next one was going to burst. Watching these shells burst – they were mostly shrapnel then – the shrapnel bullets each left a thin line of smoke, so that as each shell burst the shrapnel came from each burst in the shape of a fan.[16]
>
> Corporal James McCudden, 3 Squadron, RFC

In the early days the pilots indulged in a 'cat and mouse' game with the gunners.

> How often did one turn? How long did one wait after turning? And then what? Did one alter one's height just after a shell had burst or just before? 'After' might be too late; but how did one know when it was just 'before'? I wondered if I ought not to try everything at once so as to be on the safe side. Sudden sympathy for driven grouse came to me; the Twelfth of August appeared as the feast day of aerial murder.[17]
>
> Second Lieutenant Duncan Grinnell-Milne, 16 Squadron, RFC

As the numbers of anti-aircraft guns grew, then so "Archie" became less of a game and more of a trial, as a veritable wall of shell bursts would appear in front of an aircraft's line of flight. Yet the odds were still in favour of the pilot, for the technology of aerial gunnery was primitive, lacking any real predictive element and the aircraft were far more resilient than they appeared, often surviving anything but a direct hit.

The second method of disposing of the opposing aircraft was for your own aircraft to shoot them down. Yet this was hampered by the technical difficulties in getting a machine gun into the air in low-powered aircraft. Men tried, filled with malicious intent, but the weight of the machine gun meant that they could not gain the height they needed in time to engage any putative enemy. Without machine guns, the early attempts to engage an enemy aircraft with a rifle, shotgun or revolver, were usually fruitless.

16 J. T. B. McCudden, *Five Years in the Royal Flying Corps* (London: Aeroplane and General, 1918), p.61.

17 D. Grinnell-Milne, *Wind in the Wires* (London: John Hamilton, Ltd., 1933), pp.118-119.

> I had been a very good rifle shot all my life and had before the war shot a number of stags in Scotland. So I was very confident of my marksmanship. We met a German aircraft at about the same altitude and speed as ourselves so that we couldn't get any closer than 600 yards. I put my sights on the service rifle to 600 yards and fired six deliberate shots – and was miserable that I didn't hit him at all, I've no doubt I was miles away. We had no conception then at what close ranges it was necessary to shoot to have any effect at all. Later we learnt that with the vibrating platform that effective range rarely exceeded 50 yards.[18]
>
> Lieutenant Archibald James, 16 Squadron RFC

As a result, in the first six months of the war aircraft were able to carry out their functions with little fear of interference. Once again though military need was the mother of invention and it was not long before the rapid improvements in aircraft performance allowed more weight to be carried aloft

The "Scout" aircraft were originally intended as fast aircraft to 'scout' out ahead of the BEF, but their speed meant they were often chosen to try and shoot down German reconnaissance or artillery observation aircraft. Soon 'scout' became the term for what would in later years be known as the 'fighter' – an aircraft designed for the primary purpose of destroying opposing aircraft.

The Bristol Scout had a speed of over 80mph and could carry aloft the Lewis gun without ruining its performance. However as a tractor aircraft, there was a danger of shooting its own propeller off if the Lewis gun was aligned to shoot straight ahead in the direction of flight. Captain Lanoe Hawker had been assigned to fly the Bristol Scout attached to 6 Squadron and he experimented with a Lewis gun mounted to the left of his cockpit trained to fire obliquely past the propeller. Aiming was difficult in the extreme, given the extra problem of allowing for an inbuilt deflection in addition to the normal difficulties of aerial gunnery. Hawker however was a man of considerable determination as was evident over Ypres on 25 July 1915.

> Bristol attacked two machines behind the lines, one at Passchendaele about 6pm and one over Houthulst Forest about 6.20 pm. Both machines dived and the Bristol loosed a drum at each at about 400 yards before returning. The Bristol climbed to 11,000 and about 7 pm saw a hostile machine being fired at by anti-aircraft guns at about 10,000 over Hooge. The Bristol approached down-sun and opened fire at about 100 yards range. The hostile machine burst into flames, turned upside down, and crashed east of Zillebeke.[19]
>
> Captain Lanoe Hawker, 6 Squadron, RFC

18 IWM: James, Reel 2.
19 L. Hawker Combat Report quoted by Hawker, *Hawker V.C.,* p.103.

A Vickers Fighter (F.B.5, also known as the 'Gunbus') attacking a German Taube reconnaissance aeroplane. The Vickers Fighter was the first purpose built British fighter aircraft, but proved slow and mechanically unreliable. (Editor's Collection)

Hawker had the determination and skill to overcome the inherent weakness of the skewed Lewis gun mounting.

There was already a far simpler solution available, although it rather dodged the real issue. The "pusher" type of aircraft (with the engine behind the wings) could mount a Lewis gun in the observer's front nacelle with a clear range of vision. The first purpose-built British scout would be the Vickers Fighter (FB5) biplane pusher which began to arrive in dribs and drabs on the Western Front in February 1915. Early in the war the RFC squadrons would be made up of several different types of aircraft and were relied upon to carry out multiple roles, assigning the most appropriate aircraft for each mission. However it was becoming evident that squadrons would have to specialise. One turning point was the arrival in July 1915 of 11 Squadron, RFC, the first homogeneous scout squadron, equipped solely with the Vickers Fighters. It was soon evident that the Vickers had a considerable advantage in combat over the German machines, as many were still not armed with machine-guns. This was demonstrated when on 10 May a Vickers, armed with a Lewis gun and a rifle encountered a German aircraft. The Vickers was piloted by Lieutenant W. H. D. Acland, accompanied by Air Mechanic J. N. Rogers as his observer.

> We sighted an aeroplane not being shelled about 3 or 4 miles away to the S.E. and high up. We climbed to about 10,000 feet and then gave chase. He did not appear to see me and was apparently making for Lille. We caught him up and opened fire from above and behind at about 50 yards. The pilot was hit and the machine also, as I saw flakes of material flying off. They dived and we followed

> and the observer fired with his pistol but did little damage. I saw the observer then drop his arm as if he was hit. The machine then nose-dived from about 1,500 feet, turned on her back and fell to the ground, quite close to Lille. We came down to 2,000 feet to look at it, the machine appeared to be completely wrecked.
>
> Lieutenant W. H. D. Acland, 5th Squadron, RFC

The Vickers was powerful enough to carry the vital machine gun, but it was far too mechanically temperamental and slow to catch any but the terminally unwary. Scout aircraft had to be reliable, strong and fast if they were to be effective. Further developments of the pusher pattern, including the vastly superior two-seater FE2B or single-seater DH2 scouts, were in the pipeline, but not yet available for operational deployment. On top of this, the resistance to gathering together the scouts attached to the corps squadrons meant that 11 Squadron would remain the only dedicated scout squadron until 18 Squadron arrived in mid-November 1915.

Another strand of experimentation was reaching fruition in the summer of 1915. The French pilot Roland Garros fitted deflector plates to the propeller of his Morane-Saulnier Type L Parasol Monoplane. This allowed him to fire straight ahead, through the arc of the propeller and hence to aim his guns by pointing the whole aircraft at the target. On 1 April Garros had shot down the first of three German aircraft, but was then brought down himself on 18 April. The remnants of the Garros aircraft were handed to Anthony Fokker, a Dutch aircraft designer and manufacturer who was working for Germany. The simple Garros device acted as a spur to Fokker's design team of engineers who developed a practical interrupter system allowing the machine gun to fire through the arc of the propeller and thereby eliminated the need for the manifestly dangerous deflector plates. Fokker fitted this to a copy of the Morane-Saulnier Monoplane that was being manufactured at his aircraft factory – the end result being the Fokker Eindecker E1.

The Fokkers reached the front and scored their first victories over their flabbergasted opponents in July and August 1915. This marked the beginning of the 'Fokker scourge' and the end of a period of relative security for the RFC over the Western Front. At first the number of casualties was small as the Fokkers were largely used in a defensive capacity to escort German reconnaissance aircraft. As more Fokkers reached the front they began to be used aggressively, actively seeking out British aircraft. Yet teething problems and a series of accidental crashes caused the aircraft to be withdrawn for safety checks in early September. The respite was only temporary, for the Fokkers would be back.

The posting of Sir David Henderson to take up the key post of Director General of Military Aeronautics, meant that Hugh Trenchard was promoted to brigadier and given the command of the RFC on the Western Front in August 1915. Trenchard was greatly assisted in his task by the tact and competence of Captain Maurice Baring. Captain Archibald James recalled his memories of Trenchard.

> He was that peculiar thing – a totally inarticulate genius. He had no power of expression whatsoever either verbally or on paper. He always had to have by him somebody to collect and correct his English, his thoughts and so on. During the whole war this was performed by Maurice Baring, one of the most charming men that ever lived, brilliant writer, charming person – and he knew all the squadrons which 'Boom' visited very frequently. It became a catchword, "Take that down, Baring!"[20]
>
> Captain Archibald James, 2 Squadron, RFC

He may have appeared inarticulate, but Trenchard had developed an unswerving belief that the RFC was entirely subordinate to the requirements of the army; they must do whatever was required and bear any losses to service those needs. In this he was entirely right; that was what the BEF commanders expected – indeed demanded – during the build up to any offensive.

The RFC was heavily engaged at this time in the myriad preparations for the Battle of Loos launched on 25 September. This was the British flanking contribution to the co-ordinated French offensives in Champagne and Artois. The British artillery concentration, in terms of guns and shells per yard of German trench attacked, was a great deal less than had been achieved at Neuve Chapelle. To compensate for the insufficient artillery support it had been decided to use poison gas in an attempt to decisively rupture the German front line.[21]

The First Wing RFC supported the First Army and their overall effort was distinguished by the noticeable improvements in the performance of their corps functions. The photographic reconnaissance aircraft were now equipped with the Type 'C' cameras, which were fixed firmly to the side of the aircraft, with a simplified mechanism for changing and storing the glass plate negatives. The art of photographic interpretation had begun to blossom, as it had been realised that the direction of the light could be used to help determine whether a given feature was convex or concave. Furthermore, the length of the shadow cast could also determine its relative height, depth and shape – and hence what it was. Targeting had thus gained in sophistication, whilst the system of artillery observation using the clock code was by this time well-established. In addition a codification of the wireless signals used in communicating with the artillery had been achieved and a 'JJ' call developed, which when used in conjunction with a specific map square indicated an exceptional target opportunity worthy of intervention by massed corps artillery – for instance an incoming German counter-attack or an exposed gun battery.

Since May 1915, British aerial reconnaissance had gained a further string to its bow with the introduction of kite balloons, following on from the successful experiments

20 IWM: James, Reel 4.

21 For further discussion of the Battle of Loos, see the work of Brian Curragh and Michael Woods in this volume.

of the French. An observer could ascend in the basket hanging below the balloon, linked to the ground by telephone, from which lofty vantage point he could provide artillery observation onto targets that would otherwise be invisible. The balloons had a restricted viewpoint over the battlefield and struggled to observe the rear areas behind ridges, but they had the great advantage that they were less affected by weather conditions and could stay aloft all day. Whereas German batteries could suspend fire when an aircraft was overhead, the balloons were a near-permanent presence, looming above them and watching for flashes to locate the guns.

Bombing was still hampered despite the improved bombsite designed by the Central Flying School which took some account of speed and height. A coordinated attempt was made by aircraft of the Second and Third Wings RFC to engage in interdiction bombing, concentrating on the railways, stations and junctions in the Lille-Douai-Valenciennes sector. Just under 5½ tons of bombs were dropped, some trains, stations and railway lines were hit, but little of importance was achieved as the movement of reserves was not really affected. In addition, it was becoming noticeable that the German anti-aircraft defences were a growing threat around obvious bombing targets such as rail yards.

Once the battle started on 25 September, the inclement weather conditions, coupled with the continuing failure to establish a robust methodology, meant that the RFC contact patrols once again failed to keep track of the battle despite experiments with yellow smoke candles and cloth arrows. After a patchy first day, the offensive ground to a halt and failed in a welter of blood. The fighting dragged on into October, by which time the returning Fokkers were making their presence felt.

The tactics of scout aerial fighting were being evolved by young German Fokker pilots such as *Leutnants* Max Immelmann and Oswald Boelcke. They would stalk their intended prey, seeking to dive down from the sun, or from cloud cover, to attack from behind, giving their victims little or no chance of returning fire. Hit or miss, the Fokkers would continue their dive, using their superior speed, thus slipping away from possible retribution. If their target had survived, then they would immediately regain sufficient altitude to make another diving attack – or seek a less alert victim. A typical combat occurred on 26 October, when Immelmann attacked a Vickers Fighter piloted by Captain C. C. Darley with his observer 2nd Lieutenant R.J. Slade. The Vickers was caught totally by surprise.

> I took up the pursuit, hiding behind his tail all the time. I followed him for about a quarter of an hour in this fashion. My fingers were itching to shoot, but I controlled myself and withheld my fire until I was within 60 metres of him. I could plainly see the observer in the front seat peering out downward. 'Knack-knack-knack' went my gun. Fifty rounds, and then a long flame shot out of his engine. Another fifty rounds at the pilot. Now his fate was sealed. He went down in long spirals to land. Almost every bullet of my first series went home. Elevator, rudder, wings, engine, tank and control wires were shot up. The pilot had a bullet in the right upper arm. I also shot his right thumb away. The

> machine had received forty hits. The observer was unwounded. His machine-gun was in perfect working order, but he had not fired a single shot. So complete was the surprise I sprung on him.[22]
>
> Leutnant Max Immelmann, 62 Section, German Air Service

The Vickers was too slow and unwieldy to face the "flying gun" as the Fokker was sometimes described. Technology had rendered the British plane obsolete. Immelmann was credited with inventing the 'Immelmann Turn' whereby his Fokker would make a half-roll off the top of a half-loop to turn the tables on any pursuing aircraft. But more deadly than any flying manoeuvre was the introduction of Fokkers hunting in threes, presaging formation tactics, as the leader made the attacks protected by the other two pilots. Killing without risk was the objective – and the corps aircraft carrying out the bread and butter tasks of reconnaissance and artillery observation were the prime target.

By now, the terrible and unforeseen weakness in combat of the main corps aircraft, the BE2c, was fully exposed. Its inherent stability had become a severe handicap, as it could not be effectively manoeuvred to take rapid evasive action. The observer sat in the front cockpit where both his view and field of fire from his Lewis gun were obstructed by the wings and a linking forest of struts and wires that he would be well advised not to shoot away. This was obviously totally inadequate in the face of ever more deadly Fokker attacks. Without parachutes, the crews were often left imprisoned in a flaming coffin. But back in Britain the now obsolescent BE2cs continued to roll off the production lines. The contracts had been signed and there was insufficient flexibility within the fledgling aircraft industry system to change course. New aircraft took months, if not years to design, with the availability of suitable aero-engines being a particular limiting factor.

The early experimental Fokker EI had been upgraded, with the introduction of first the EII and then the more reliable EIII models. Numbers were still low, with around eight operational in October, rising to around forty in December. The idea of a veritable "Fokker scourge" sweeping the skies took a strong grip on many RFC pilots. Hampered by inadequate aircraft the odds were stacked against British pilots in combat. Nevertheless they fought fearlessly against their superior opponents; the studies conducted by Trevor Henshaw of dozens of combat reports in the course of writing the masterly *The Sky their Battlefield II* have uncovered little evidence of pilots breaking off combat, except when afflicted with engine problems or a jammed machine gun – both common problems.[23]

As the real, or imagined Fokker, menace grew ever larger, Trenchard continued to maintain that the RFC's losses were relatively slight compared to the thousands

22 M. Immelmann letter 28/10/1915 quoted by F. Immelmann, *Immelmann: the Eagle of Lille* (London: John Hamilton, 1935), pp.142-143.

23 T. Henshaw, *The Sky Their Battlefield II* (London: Fetubi Book, 2014), p.22.

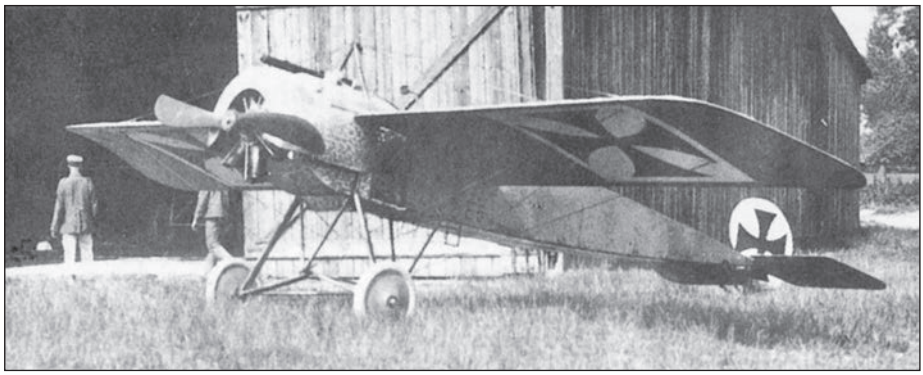
of deaths suffered by the infantry. Yet although numerically small, the RFC could ill-afford its casualties. Aircraft – and more importantly, trained aircrew – shot down in seconds could take months to replace. Trenchard realised that somehow he had to maintain morale and developed a policy of replacing all squadron casualties immediately.

> I always looked on the RFC as a family. I tried to put myself in the others' places and to consider the feelings of those who flew as if they had been my own. If as an ordinary pilot you see no vacant places around you, the tendency is to brood less on the fate of friends who have gone forever. Instead your mind is taken up with buying drinks for the newcomers and making them feel at home. It was a matter of pride and human understanding.[24]
>
> Brigadier-General Hugh Trenchard, Headquarters, RFC

It took moral courage for Trenchard to maintain his aggressive posture. Over fifty RFC pilots and observers were shot down between November 1915 and January 1916 as the Fokker scourge raged; but, following Trenchard's line, the RFC would continue to carry out its duty at all costs. Methods could be modified, but not the overall aggressive aerial approach. Although the casualties were infinitesimal in comparison with those suffered in the trenches below them, it became apparent that something would have to be done if the RFC was to continue to carry out its duties effectively in 1916.

> Until the Royal Flying Corps are in possession of a machine as good as or better than the German Fokker it seems that a change in the tactics employed becomes necessary. It is hoped very shortly to obtain a machine which will be able to successfully engage the Fokkers at present in use by the Germans. In the meantime, it must be laid down as a hard and fast rule that a machine proceeding on reconnaissance must be escorted by at least three other fighting machines. These machines must fly in close formation and a reconnaissance should not be continued if any of the machines become detached. This should apply to both short and distant reconnaissances. Aeroplanes proceeding on photographic duty any considerable distance east of the line should be similarly escorted. From recent experience it seems that the Germans are now employing their aeroplanes in groups of three or four, and these numbers are frequently encountered by our aeroplanes. Flying in close formation must be practised by all pilots.[25]
>
> Brigadier-General Hugh Trenchard, Headquarters, RFC

24 H. M. Trenchard quoted by Boyle, *Trenchard* p.190.
25 HQ RFC Order issued 14/1/1916 quoted in H. A. Jones, *The War in the Air, Vol. II*, pp.156-157.



A prototype Fokker Eindecker. The Eindecker was the first plane to possess an interrupter gear that allowed the pilot to fire through the propeller. The speed, maneuverability and firepower of these new aircraft revolutionised air-to-air combat and created the sensational "Fokker Scourge". (Editor's Collection)

Trenchard did not intend to give up dangerous reconnaissance work in 1916; he was merely modifying his tactics to reflect the changing circumstances. The work would go on. This approach was naturally more than acceptable to Haig who had been appointed as Commander in Chief of the BEF in December 1915.

Flying in formation had certainly helped a few weeks earlier when three Morane-Saulnier Type LA had been sent on a reconnaissance patrol over Valenciennes on 19 December. Four days earlier 2nd Lieutenants A. V. Hobbs and C. E. T. Tudor-Jones had been killed by Max Immelmann trying to carry out the same mission. Sergeant James McCudden was flying as observer with Lieutenant R. A. Saunders.

> I saw a long dark brown form fairly streaking across the sky. We could see that it was a German machine, and when it got above and behind our middle machine it dived on to it for all the world like a huge hawk on a hapless sparrow. I now saw the black crosses on the underneath surface of the Fokker's wings, for a Fokker it was, and as it got to close range, Mr. Mealing, the pilot of this middle machine, turned, and thus saved itself, although the Fokker had already hit the machine. The Fokker had by now turned and was coming towards our machine, nose on, slightly above. Not having a gun mounting to fire in that direction, I stood up, with my Lewis gun to the shoulder, and fired as he passed over our right wing. He carried on flying in the opposite direction until he was lost to view. We were by now over Douai Aerodrome, and, looking down, I could see several enemy machines leaving the ground. I watched them for a while, and then noticed the Fokker climbing up under our tail. I told my pilot to turn, and then fired half a drum of Lewis at the Fokker at 300 yards range. The Fokker seemed rather surprised that we had seen him, and immediately turned off to my left rear as I was facing the tail. After this he climbed about 300 feet above us, and then put

> his nose down to fire. Having been waiting for him, I opened fire at once, and he promptly pulled out of his dive and retired to a distance of 500 yards, at which distance he remained, for every time he came closer I fired a short burst, which had the desired effect of keeping him at a distance. But now we had reached Valenciennes, and were circling round, obtaining the desired information … It was assumed that the Fokker pilot was most likely Immelmann, and no doubt when we encountered him he was waiting for the next machine that he knew we would send to get the information for which Mr. Hobbs and Mr. Tudor-Jones had given their lives, but instead of finding one machine he ran into three. … I was very thankful indeed to return from this outing … I had imagined that if once Immelmann in his Fokker saw us there was not much chance for us. However, we live and learn.[26]
>
> Sergeant James McCudden, 3 Squadron RFC

He did indeed. Such actions demonstrated that formations of determined pilots could survive despite the attentions of the Fokkers. They did not meekly surrender their lives, but strove to overcome the design faults lurking within their aircraft and in the months to come would pass on their experience to others to perform their duties in the dangerous skies of 1916.

> Attack on same level if possible. In BE2c use side-mounting. Don't open fire over 500 yards. You don't carry enough cartridges to waste. Fire in bursts of not over ten. Switch your gun quickly to back mounting as he passes and fire remainder of drum. i) If Hun dives replace gun on side bracket. ii) Attack as before. iii) Put gun on front mounting and dive for position under tail. Never follow a machine directly behind he will rake you through and through. Never let a machine get under your tail. Never let a machine swoop down on you unawares from behind. At first sound of a shot from behind turn to right and left with nose down before looking round even. It is with his first burst of fire that the Fokker Scout gets his machine down. If an E.A. Scout presses his attack home and persists in following go into a slow spiral losing as little height as possible.[27]
>
> Lieutenant Bernard Rice, 2 Squadron, RFC

The numbers lost to this deadly German innovation were small, yet the sudden spike in the casualty rate and the unfounded myth of invincibility that became associated with the Fokker had an indelible impact on wider public opinion. They became seen as a sinister force and were a favourite topic of news-hungry British tabloids. The real answer lay in better, faster British aircraft carrying a more powerful armament. Even after the FE2B, DH2, FE8, Sopwith 1½ Strutter and Nieuport Scout started

26 McCudden, *Five Years in the Royal Flying Corps*, p.84-85.
27 RAF Museum, B. Rice Collection, Manuscript notes.

to arrive at the front in 1916, the spectre of the Fokker lingered on long after its real threat had been removed.

In 1915 the BEF had successfully integrated aircraft into its overall battle plan alongside the artillery, infantry and the partially sidelined cavalry. As the BEF had grown, the RFC matched its expansion proportionately. By the end of the year, no army commander could envisage organising an attack without full-scale photographic reconnaissance, detailed photographic interpretation of the results to identify targets and inform tactical plans, copious artillery observation during the preliminary bombardments and actual attack, interdiction bombing to attempt to disrupt German reinforcements to the area and contact patrols to determine progress and holdups. There were many practical and theoretical difficulties still to be overcome, especially in the performance of bombing and contact patrols, but the RFC had nevertheless taken a giant step towards the development of the all arms battle. The scale of aerial warfare had increased exponentially during 1915, reflecting the expansion of the challenges that had to be overcome by the BEF on the ground. Yet air losses remained relatively minor (193 casualties of which only 56 were killed[28]) given the scale of what was achieved, and infinitesimal when compared to the widespread slaughter on the ground. Towards the end of 1915, the once open-skies had become increasingly populated with aircraft and the birth of the scout had brought a new tumult to the clouds.

28 Henshaw, *Sky their Battlefield II*, p.347.

6

British-Indian Army Cavalry: From Mobilisation to the Western Front 1915[1]

Graham Winton

This is not war; it is the ending of the world.[2]

Despite unfounded pre-war concerns about a growing political movement for self-government and unrest, India immediately joined the Allied war effort in August 1914. Despite being encouraged by Germany to advance anti-British sentiment. Support from India included the military and economic resources of the Indian Government as well as those of 700 semi-autonomous Princely, or Native States.[3]

On 30 July 1914, the Government of India made a commitment to send an Expeditionary Force, "A", to Egypt; with a view to its possible employment in Europe.[4] The Force, of two infantry divisions and 9th (Secunderabad) Cavalry Brigade, formed the Indian Army Corps [IAC] and mobilised on 9 August.[5] Three additional cavalry

1 The Army of India consisted of two elements. The "Indian Army" (composed of native Indians) and British regiments stationed in India, the "British Army in India". British India included what became independent India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma.

2 David Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*, (London: Macmillan, 1999).

3 The Princely States, some only minor fiefdoms, were not governed directly by British India but co-existed through a series of subsidiary alliances retaining autonomy within the State except for external affairs. After 1885 the British created a small military reserve force recruited from these States, trained and equipped by the Indian Army, but paid for by the State. These forces were largely restricted to ceremonial and internal policing. Gordon Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches*, (Stroud: Spellmount, 2004), p.22; Peter Duckers, *The British-Indian Army 1860-1914*, (Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 2003), pp.32-33.

4 In addition, six smaller Indian Expeditionary Forces were assembled; B-C (East Africa), D (Mesopotamia), E-F (Egypt), G (Gallipoli). David Payne, *The Indian Army on the Western Front*, 21 May, 2008. James Edward Edmonds, *History of the Great War*, (London: Macmillan, 1927) Vol.II, p.8.

5 See Appendix I. The army corps structure did not exist in the peacetime British-Indian Army.

brigades then formed the 1st Indian Cavalry Division; including Royal Horse Artillery [RHA] batteries and Indian non-combatants.[6] The 15th Lancers (Cureton's Multanis) and 4th Cavalry Regiment were attached as divisional cavalry to the 3rd (Lahore) and 7th (Meerut) Infantry Divisions respectively. Major Edward Tennant (Deccan Horse) wrote that on the:

> conclusion of spring field training in 1914 there were no rumours of war; by the end of July speculation was rife but the consensus was the crises would blow over. Even when war was declared there appeared small likelihood the Indian Army would be required, then suddenly on the evening 9 August came orders for mobilisation for service out of India.[7]

The Secretary of State, India, wrote to the War Office [WO] that it was essential the utmost secrecy be observed, in India, by the press and all concerned, in regard to the despatch and destination of the Force. 2nd Lieutenant Basil Carver, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons, wrote to his parents: "I have some news for you but it is strictly not to be spread about (for some reason). The Inniskillings are on their way back from India. Of course one does not know when they will arrive".[8] On India's suggestion the WO accepted an offer made by the Princely States, to employ Imperial States Service troops, including the 1st Jodhpur Lancers, the only State cavalry regiment to see active service on the Western Front.[9]

The Army Council (WO) informed the Secretary of State, India, that the Indian Expeditionary Force "A" [IEFA] would only be used on a defensive basis in Egypt,

6 See Appendix II.

7 Tennant, Edward, ("A" Squadron (Sikh) Deccan Horse) , *Royal Deccan Horse in the Great War*, (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1939), p.7.

8 British Library (hereafter BL): L/Mil/17/5/3086, Indian Expeditionary Force "A" War Diaries, Vol.1, p.8, 6 August & p.20, 9 August, Appendix 24. Basil Armitage Carver, Aldershot October 1914. Carver was at Sandhurst February 1914 and commissioned into the Inniskillings October/November 1914. He makes reference to the Inniskillings being on their way back from India and hoped to be gazetted to them. On the 12 December he was leaving Aldershot, giving his new address as Indian Expeditionary Force, c/o War Office. My thanks to Professor Emeritus Martin Carver (University of York) on behalf of the Carver family for giving me access to Basil's letters and also to Janet Yarwood.

9 BL:L/Mil/17/5/3086, Vol.1, pp.1-2, 30 July & 6 August 1914. The Lancers from Rajaputana, were officered entirely by Indians with three British officers as 'advisers'. Michael Crease, Swords Trembling in Their Scabbards: A study of Indian Officers in the Indian Cavalry, 1858-1918 (Leicester University Ph.D thesis, 2007), p.76. Twenty-seven States participated in the Imperial Services Scheme, 21 sending contingents overseas; 15 cavalry regiments and three camel corps were provided on the outbreak of war. Units of the smaller states were employed on internal security or training cavalry remounts in India. The 15th Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade, Egyptian Expeditionary Force included: Jodhpur, Mysore, Patiala and1st Hyderabad Lancers, and the Bikanir Camel Corps. BL:L/Mil/17/5/3086, Vol.1, pp.1-2; Corrigan, *Sepoys,* p.22; Duckers, *The British-Indian*, p.33.

the Mediterranean and possibly the Sudan; not outside Egypt. This drew strong objection from the Secretary of State and Viceroy (Army Department), that such a policy would be a grave political mistake and tend to extinguish loyal enthusiasm surging over the country and lead to invidious comparisons between the treatment of Dominions troops and the Army of India. They strongly urged that at least one division of Indian troops be permitted to play its part in Europe. A rapid response from the WO stated the whole IEFA would proceed direct to Marseilles and that India would also provide a complete cavalry division of four brigades.[10]

2nd Lt. Basil Carver, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons: 1896–1916. Killed in action at the Somme 21 August, aged 21. (Janet Yarwood)

The Lahore Division sailed from Bombay and Karachi between 24-29 August. A shortage of transports and escort vessels delayed the remainder of the Force until the 20 September.[11] Convoys sailed via the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, Red Sea, Suez Canal and Mediterranean. The Division arrived at Marseilles on 26 September with the 15th Lancers being the first Indian cavalry regiment to arrive in France.[12] The Meerut Division and 9th (Secunderabad) Cavalry Brigade arrived Marseilles 12-14 October, the latter attached to the IAC until transferred to the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division, Indian Cavalry Corps [ICC].[13] On arrival in France the IEFA, came under

10 BL:L/Mil/17/5/3086, Vol.1, p.80, 25-28 August, Appendix 113, & p.83, 28 August, Appendix116.

11 Ibid., p.31, 6 September, Appendix 49. Due to raiding by the German cruisers *Emden* and *Konigsberg* and the slow speed of some transports (maximum seven knots). Instructions stated the minimum strength for naval convoy support was two ships, of which one must be superior to the *Konigsberg*; it did not include armed transports. An additional regular ship of war was to be added to a large convoy.

12 The nomenclature of all Indian brigades and divisions was changed to avoid confusion with British formations, retaining only a territorial name. For example 3rd (Lahore) to the Lahore Division and 9th (Secunderabad) to Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade. Edmonds, *History of the Great War,* Vol.II, pp.8-9.

13 On 23 December 1914. The following units were also attached to the IAC from 12 October- 23 December, when transferred to the ICC: Signal troop and Cavalry Field Ambulance, "N" Battery RHA, "H" Section Ammunition Column, 1st Indian Field troop,

full British military authority, though nominally remaining under Indian Government authority. The 1st Indian Cavalry Division sailed from Bombay (Mumbai) on 16 October landing in Marseilles between 7-10 November. The Division entrained at their assembly point during the 10-12 October reaching camps at Orleans on 16th.[14] The 2nd Indian Cavalry Division, formed on the outbreak war, with the Mhow and Meerut Brigades, sailed from Bombay, 19 November, arriving Marseilles 14 December.

The mobilisation and transportation of the largest Indian Army and mounted force to fight overseas and its continued supply was a major logistical achievement. Units were raised to war strength in men, animals, transport, supplies and equipment; transported to the ports of embarkation at Bombay and Karachi embarking on ships requisitioned and converted for purpose. Embarkation and convoy timetables were co-ordinated including naval escorts. The Secunderabad Brigade sailed in a fleet of 33 transports escorted by a battleship and four cruisers. Convoys sailed via Egypt where units disembarked and re-embarked for the journey to Marseilles travelling some 5,000 miles in seven weeks.[15]

The IEFA was moved rapidly into frontline action at a crucial period in the Allied defensive operations, culminating in the first battles of Ypres, where British-Indian cavalry were engaged. The Lahore and Meerut Divisions (with their two cavalry regiments) and Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade were deployed at La Bassee, Messines and Armentiéres. During 1915 the IAC and ICC would be involved in the battles of Neuve Chapelle, Second Ypres, Festubert and Loos.[16]

For the ICC and British Army, this began a period of significant adjustment and realignment of two administrative systems and military practices. Indian forces would have their difficulties in obtaining reinforcements, especially British officers and trained sowars (troopers), in an army that was culturally very diverse in traditions, caste, religion, language and food.

Jodhpur Lancers and Jodhpur Cavalry Field Ambulance. Edmonds, *History of the Great War,* Vol.II, pp.8-9, 92, 481-486.

14 From 18 December the Division was commanded by Major-General Fanshawe, when the Indian Cavalry Corps was formed under Major-General Rimington, a former Inspector General of Cavalry, India. David Kenyon, *Horsemen in No Man's Land,* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2011), p.33; Gurcharn Singh Sandhu, *The Indian Cavalry*, (Delhi: Vision Books, 1981), Vol.1, p.298. Notification of Indian Cavalry Corps formation was issued on 27 November, effective from the arrival of the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division. The Corps HQ was to be the same as for a British Cavalry Corps HQ. National Archives (Hereafter TNA), 95/1167, 1st Indian Cavalry Division War Diary, 23 November 1914.

15 Three armed cruisers of the Royal Indian Marine. TNA: WO95/1887, 9th (Secunderabad) Brigade War Diary.

16 First battles of Ypres (19 October-22 November), La Bassee (10 October-2 November), Messines (12 October-2 November), Armentiéres (13 October-2 November). Neuve Chapelle (10-13 March), Second Ypres (22-25 May), Festubert (15-27 May) and Loos (25-28 September).

Cavalry of the British-Indian Army in India

Cavalry regiments had experienced active service throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries and were skilled and efficient, with a high standard of horsemastership and horsemanship.[17] However, they lacked the tactical experience and lessons from the 1899-1902 South African War of fighting in a dismounted role. In essence they remained a colonial cavalry force, trained, equipped and funded accordingly; performing the role required of them, which was not to fight a major modern European war with resulting heavy wastage in men, animals and equipment. This did not make India's cavalry inferior, only different and it did not take them long to adjust to fighting in Europe. The war of movement during the opening campaigns of 1914 would have suited their skills of moving quickly over broken country and fighting flexibly. These attributes would provide a basis for significant developments in cavalry tactics after 1915.[18]

Indian Cavalry was structured with one British (14 year tour) and two Indian regiments in each brigade (three of the nine regiments in each division being British – see Appendix II). Each regiment had four squadrons (A-D), of three troops each; a British regiment had three squadrons (A-C) of four troops. The four-squadron system provided a workable solution for the ethnic and religious mix within Indian regiments. Commissioned officers in British and Indian regiments held identical ranks to those of the British Army; all senior officers in Indian regiments were British (creating difficulties for replacements during 1914-1915). Indian officers, subordinate to all British Commissioned Officers, were mostly treated as commissioned officers, but with authority only over Indian troops at no more than troop level.

The given strength for cavalry regiments is never consistent, varying according to peace or war establishment, sabre or ration strength. The official, or paper strength, of a regiment usually differs to what actually existed in the field. The war establishment of a British regiment in India, at sabre strength plus HQs and machine gun section, was about 512 men. The 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons sailing from India listed 538 all ranks.[19] The establishment of an Indian regiment with 13 British and 17 Indian

17 Active service in India and overseas. Anglo-Burmese wars 1885-6, Anglo-Sikh wars, Anglo-Afghan wars (threat from Russia), Malaya, Opium wars China, Persia (1911-13), Abyssinian Campaign (1911-13), Russo-Turkish War 1878, Egypt-Suez Canal-Sudan, Central and Eastern Africa, Boxer Rebellion in China, Somaliland Campaigns (1901, 1902-04, 1908-10), British Expedition to Tibet 1903-04, Border disputes and North West Frontier Campaigns. Duckers, *The British-India*n, pp.36-44; Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, p.279.

18 Kenyon, *Horsemen in No Man's Land*, pp.33, 191, 235; Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, pp.280-1; George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp.74, 97-105; Stephen Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry 1880-1918*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp.267, 271, 279-80, 296, 298.

19 I have abbreviated the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons to The Inniskillings. *The Field Service Pocket Book, 1914*, (London: HMSO, 1914), *pp.12-23;* TNA: WO95/1176-3, 6th

officers at sabre, or rifle strength, plus HQs and machine gun section was about 530, with 168 followers.[20] 'Followers', an essential component of British and Indian regiments, were predominantly Indian non-combatants. The majority were employed in animal welfare, for example, syces (attendants, or grooms) and grass cutters. [21] Horse artillery for British-Indian Army cavalry brigades was supplied by the British RHA with 13 pounder guns.[22] Support units also tended to be British. Kenyon wrote that much of the logistic tail of each division was assembled in France, as the units had sailed quite 'light'; they received transport horses and significant allocations of equipment and personnel on arrival. Unlike the pre-war British army, which was predominantly powered by motor vehicles, the Indian Army, on mobilization, was animal powered. For example, a British cavalry division was supplied by lorries of the cavalry supply columns and ammunition parks.[23]

The most significant difference in the structure and composition of peacetime Indian cavalry regiments was the unique Silladar System of recruitment according to region and martial race.[24] All Indian regular line cavalry were part of this system, except for three regiments the 26th, 27th and 28th Light Cavalry, mounted

(Inniskilling) Dragoons War Diary, 19 November, 1914 aboard SS City of Exeter and Ingoma; Kenyon, *Horsemen in No Man's Land*, p.33 and private correspondence; TNA: WO95/1167, 1st Indian Cavalry Division War Diary, Appendix 1, gives approximate strength, war establishment, for a British regiment of 515 all ranks.

20 When an Indian regiment mobilized with pack, not draught transport, the number of followers increased to 370. British regiments in India also had followers, about 120. *Field Service Pocket Book, 1914*, pp.12-23; TNA: WO95/1167, 1st Indian Cavalry Division War Diary, gives an approximate figure of 495 including British officers; Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, p.56 gives 585 combatants; Simon Doherty & Tom Donovan, *The Indian Corps on the Western Front*, (Brighton: Tom Donovan Editions, 2014), p.13, gives 634 all ranks.

21 Official followers, authorised by headquarters, performed a wide range of essential tasks. 'Public' followers were generally skilled, such as mistry smith (caste status: craftsmen), lascars (care of tents, officer's servants, generally roles that required organised and disciplined labour), chowdhri (clerk), cooks, cutler (sharpener). 'Private' followers were unskilled performing more menial tasks such as sweepers (disposal of waste, latrines and refuse) and pakhalis, or bhistis the vital water carriers. Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, p.56, a regiment with combat strength of 585 and 520 horses, employed 584 non-combatants, 260 being syces and 260 grass cutters; Heathcote, TA, *The Indian Army*, (London: David & Charles, 1974), pp.113-4; Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army*, p.36.

22 During the Indian Mutiny (1857) artillery proved the mutineer's most effective arm. Consequently, except for a small number of mountain artillery batteries, artillery was under the command of British officers, Royal Regiment of Artillery.

23 Kenyon, *Horsemen in No Man's Land*, p.33; Graham Winton, *Theirs Not To Reason Why: Horsing the British Army 1875-1925*, (Solihull: Helion & Company, 2014), p.207.

24 Silladar, probably an adaptation of the Persian sillahbardar, or soldier bearing arms. It was an irregular cavalry system of recruitment, descended from the Mughal and Maratha cavalry and adopted by the East India Company because of its cheapness. Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, p.87.

on government supplied horses, as were British cavalry.[25] They were individually recruited, maintained and funded with no linking structure to other regiments, or centralised recruiting system. The quality of clothing, saddlery, horses, equipment and to some extent weapons depended on the wealth and discretion of the individual regiment. Mason describes them as having a dual entity, a fighting organisation and a commercial concern; a 'joint stock company' with a strong co-operative element, which purchased, bred and trained horses and mules and farmed on a large scale; purchased wholesale grain, saddlery, cloth, boots and other equipment which was then sold to men of the regiment.[26] On mobilisation nothing could be drawn from government arsenals or supply depots, there was no central reserve for reinforcements. This system was totally unsuited to a lengthy, destructive major European war. By the end of 1915 Indian and British cavalry were beginning to be supplied on the same basis.[27]

British-Indian Cavalry on the Western Front 1914

On arriving at Marseilles, the Lahore (with 15th Lancers) and Meerut (with 4th Cavalry) Divisions and Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade moved very quickly to support the British II Corps at La Bassee. The two divisional cavalry regiments and Secunderabad Brigade fought in dismounted roles and as a much needed mobile reserve. Tennant wrote that:

> No one ever contemplated the possibility of cavalry being utilized in any other way than as cavalry, coming as a shock when the brigade was issued with infantry bayonets with no convenient way of carrying them when mounted and of a pattern that did not fit the newly issued rifles.

25 The surviving three pre Indian Mutiny (1878) regular regiments of the old Madras Presidency cavalry, George MacMunn, *The Armies of India*, (London: A. & C. Black, 1911), pp.12-13, 176-80. The Silladar System was abolished in 1922.

26 Philip Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974) p.377; *Army In India and Its Evolution*, (Government of India, 1924), pp.91-98; Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, pp.409-10; George MacMunn, *Behind The Scenes In Many Wars*, (London: John Murray, 1930), pp.333-4.

27 Kenyon, *Horsemen in No Man's Land*, p.33; Omissi, *Indian Voices,* 1999, p.364; MacMunn, *The Armies of India,* 1911, pp.129-172. Only three regiments were "class" corps composed of one group: 1st Skinner's Horse (entirely Muhammadans of Hindustan and Southern Punjab), 14th Lancers Murray's Jat lancers (entirely Jats), 15th Lancers Cureton's Multanis (entirely Multani Pathans and kindred neighbouring races). Remaining regiments consisted of "class" squadrons within a regiment, principal divisions being Sikhs, Dogras, Pathans, Punjabi, Hindustani or Dekhani Muhammadans, Jats, Rajputs. The 34th Poona Horse had two squadrons of Rathore Rajputs, one of Kaimkhanis and one Punjabi Muslims. Tennant*, Royal Deccan Horse*, p.7; Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, pp.292-3; Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army*, p.294.

Indian troops were not put at a disadvantage when their Mk.II pattern rifles were replaced with the Mk.III pattern Lee Enfield rifle. The Mk.III was adopted by the British Army in 1907. The main difference between the two patterns, which simplified usage, was the absence of the cartridge charger bridge on the Mk.II and in ammunition. For supply purposes all ammunition had to take the same cartridge.[28]

When the British II Corps moved back to a line Givenchy-Neuve Chapelle-Fauquissart the Lahore Division moved into the gap supported by the 15th Lancers.[29] On 30 October, the Lancers helped repulse three separate German attacks.[30] Between 29-30 October the IAC relieved II Corps, taking over about ten miles of line, Givenchy-Fauquissart, during the final days of the battle. The Lancers again moved into support trenches during the evenings.[31] Their first recorded casualties were near Laventie on the 5 November.[32] On the 16 November they marched to billets whilst the Lahore Division was rested. Marching again to reserve trenches, each squadron separately found 50-60 rifles to support the four infantry regiments.[33] When relieved by the Meerut Division, the Lancer's machine gun section remained in the trenches, 'on loan' until the 17 December. The section was 'loaned' out for at least 110 days (about 16 weeks) during 1915.

Owing to a shortage of machine guns early in the war sections remained considerably longer in the trenches, providing much needed additional firepower. Indian cavalry regiments were supplied with a machine gun section of two maxim guns; in September 1915 two additional guns (Vickers) were issued. The 2nd Division received six Vickers guns per brigade formed into a battery, initially transported in limbered wagons as pack saddles were unavailable. Two additional Vickers guns per regiment were formed into machine gun squadrons as a brigade unit for tactical purposes; and carried on pack mules, although the ten mules received were undersized and "must be changed". The Inniskillings received a reinforcement of 16 machine gun mules.[34]

28 Tennant, *Royal Deccan Horse*, p.13; I am grateful to Michael LoCicero for information on the Lee Enfield rifle.

29 Jullundur Infantry Brigade moved into the gap between Fauquiassart and Rouges Bancs, one squadron supporting the 47th Sikhs during the German attack on Neuve Chapelle.

30 27 and 28 October 1914. TNA: WO95/3918-1, 15th Indian Lancers War Diary, pp.1-2.

31 Ibid., 31 October-4 November; supporting the Jullundur Brigade, Sailly Sur Lys in the rear of the 59th (Scinde Rifles).

32 A squadron commander, trumpeter and attached French interpreter were wounded by high explosive shells; their three horses were subsequently destroyed.

33 Night of 2-3 December, supporting the Jullundur Brigade, returning to billets and rejoining their horses. and marching to new billets (4 December) finally reaching Bethune on the12th. Casualties included a major, jemadar (died), 4 NCOs and men, hit by bursting shrapnel whilst digging a communication trench. Jemadar was the lowest Indian cavalry commissioned officer rank in command of a platoon or troop; often holding assistant quartermaster, or adjutant posts, to a British officer within a regiment.

34 Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry,* p.30; Tennant, *Royal Deccan Horse*, p.40; TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary , 25 September & 10 October 1915; TNA: WO95/1176-3, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons War Diary, October 1915. In October 1915

Divisional RHA batteries and ammunition columns were also loaned outside the Corps. For example, three of the four 1st Division batteries and columns moved for temporary duty with Second Army (28 January-3 March); those of 2nd Division to First Army for operations at Neuve Chapelle (2 April).

During the battle of Givenchy the Lancers formed a reserve to the Ferozepore Brigade. A detachment was ordered forward (19 December) to support the 129th Baluchis, which were forced to retire before the Lancers arrived. The detachment moved back with the 129th, digging reserve trenches until relieved on the 22nd.[35]

During October-November the line held by the IAC was subjected to constant bombardment and attack. During a serious attack on the line held by the 2/2nd Gurkhas (Bareilly Brigade), west of Neuve Chapelle (2 November), the 34th Poona Horse [34th Horse] was ordered to assist, advancing with small parties of the 7th Dragoon Guards in support. After a series of attacks and counter attacks the 34th Horse moved back from an exposed position having suffered one British officer and five men killed, one British officer (interpreter) and 28 men wounded, six missing (including two Indian officers). The 7th Dragoon Guards suffered one officer and five men wounded.[36] The Secunderabad moved forward to meet another attack (9 November) but were not used. The 20th Deccan Horse remained in billets close to the trenches, suffering their first casualties from shelling before moving back on the 17th. The Brigade moved to new billets in the Bethune area, where sowars and horses experienced their first heavy snow.

German attacks in the Festubert area (22-23 November) resulted in the loss of some 874 yards (800m) of IAC held trenches. The failure of counter-attacks led to a detachment of the Secunderabad (740 rifles), the only IAC reserve, being rushed forward as reinforcements in its defence; returning to billets (24th) not having been engaged.[37] Another detachment (about 450 rifles) was in reserve during a counter attack by units of the Lahore and Meerut Divisions on German trenches near Festubert.[38] The 34th Horse spent the night of 23 November frozen stiff in support trenches. The cavalry

cavalry firepower was increased with the formation of the Machine Gun Corps (Cavalry) with pack mounted Hotchkiss guns. One squadron per brigade of six – two gun sections.

35 Lahore Division. The officer in command of the Lancers was wounded and captured in the advance, but rescued five hours later when the 1st Manchesters counter attacked. The Lancers marched to billets at Marles about six miles SW Bethune for a period of rest and reinforcement – two officers from the 32nd Lancers and 27 other ranks, mounted on horses from the Indian base at Rouen.

36 Secunderabad Brigade, the first regiment of the ICC to be engaged in battle.TNA: WO95/1187, 34th Poona Horse War Diary, 2 November, 1914; Roly Grimshaw, *Indian Cavalry Officer 1914-1915*, (Tunbridge Wells: Costello, 1986), pp.29-32; Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, p.294.

37 TNA: WO95/1187, 34th Poona Horse War Diary; Grimshaw, *Indian Cavalry Officer*, pp.39-50; Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, p.295.

38 Reinforcements, 150 from each regiment, to the Ferozepore Brigade (150 of these being held in local reserve joined by a detachment of 50 Jodhpur Lancers). The machine gun

detachment relieved the infantry in trenches during the 24th- 27th. When relieved, their machine gun sections remained with the infantry brigade.[39] The Secunderabad held these trenches from 24 November-3 December, relief being arranged between squadrons of each regiment, until returning to Corps reserve on 4 December.[40]

The Germans attacked trenches in front of Givenchy (20 December), held by the 1st Manchesters.[41] After hard fighting, sections of the Lahore and Meerut Divisions were drawn back. A detachment of the Secunderabad (200 men from each of the four regiments) moved up for a counter-attack to the rear of Festubert, joining the 2/8 Gurkha Rifles and 47th Sikhs. The attack was launched on 22nd without a preliminary reconnaissance; the exact German positions were unknown and the line of deployment for the counter-attack not marked out. In the confusion, units strayed from intended lines of advance, leaving other units unsupported. In the dark of early morning the Deccan Horse and 34th Horse advanced under enemy fire. By the light of German Verey pistols, small groups of men were seen crawling, crossing deep and wide ditches and cutting a passage through barbed wire. The attackers were subjected to heavy fire, particularly from the flanks. A few isolated groups of the 34th reached the German trenches. The Deccan Horse lost most of their British and Indian officers and no troops advanced in their support. Unsupported, both units withdrew under heavy German fire. One squadron of the 34th Horse, not receiving orders to withdraw, spent the whole day in the open close to the German trenches and under fire from both sides. In the Givenchy actions the 34th Horse suffered 49 casualties including two British and three Indian officers. The Deccan Horse suffered 44% casualties, losing 81 killed or wounded, including two British and five Indian officers.

The reformed Secunderabad moved to an intermediate line to meet an expected new German attack. A detachment moved to Festubert, remaining in a state of readiness during the 22 December, until the whole Corps was relieved.

The Ambala and Sialkot Brigades[42] were moved to Festubert during the 20-21 December, when the Secunderabad Brigade launched the unsuccessful attack at Givenchy. The two brigades were placed in trenches that were no more than ditches, half full of liquid mud, remaining in the area for three days until relieved. All the

sections of 34th Horse and Deccan Horse remained with the infantry brigade, Jodhpur Lancers went into brigade reserve.

39 A detachment of 34th Horse of 3 officers & 150 men. Lt. De Pass was posthumously awarded the VC during the defence of these trenches. TNA: WO95/1187, 34th Poona Horse War Diary; Grimshaw, *Indian Cavalry Officer,* (Grimshaw was wounded on the 26th).

40 To allow men in fire and support trenches to be relieved by those in local reserves every 24 hours, the numbers increased to 600. In addition a detachment of 50 rifles from 7th Dragoon Guards was placed at the disposal of Connaught Rangers (Ferozepore Brigade). TNA: WO95/1187, 34th Horse War Diary.

41 Lahore Division. Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, pp.296-8.

42 1st Indian Cavalry Division. Brigades arrived Marseilles, 8 November 1914.

regiments suffered a handful of casualties due to enemy action but most were due to the cold, wet conditions.

The British I Corps relieved the exhausted IAC during the 21-22 December. The Corps was ordered, whilst in reserve, to practice night operations in preparation for supporting the infantry. Special attention was to be paid to dismounted attacks by brigades, regiments and squadrons and how best to communicate between units during attacks and moving from reserve lines. The crucial points were: the greatest possible number of men in the firing line, effective use of machine guns by night to assist an attack, siting and digging trenches, and erecting wire entanglements. Men were to be comfortable after work in the trenches, but officers were to maintain a high standard of discipline, checking any slackness in behaviour, saluting and dress.[43] Given the appalling conditions in which these men were living and fighting the final sentence seems somewhat bizarre.

Winter Operations 1914-15

The onset of winter progressively worsened conditions in the field into February 1915. Some Indian troops, still lightly clad in khaki drill, suffered particularly badly. Having left the hot climate of India, travelling through the intense heat of the Red Sea to the Suez, they experienced six months of rain, snow and frost on landing in Marseilles. The 2nd Division diarist constantly refers to weather conditions:

> Orleans was cold and wet the camps several inches deep in mud, hard frost, rain, very cold at night; a few glimpses of sun followed by gales, very high winds and heavy rain. Heavy snowstorms, about an inch of snow melted under violent storms and sleet. Sickness returns showed about 25 men per regiment were unfit for duty and admitted to hospital suffering from the conditions.[44]

The Inniskillings were ordered to withdraw from trenches where they had been standing thigh deep in water. Seven men were admitted to hospital in Bethune, 20 in the regimental hospital, all suffering from frostbite; comparing favourably with the King's Dragoon Guards with 120 frostbite cases.[45] The terrain over which the ICC would largely be engaged during 1914-1915 was depressing: a largely swampy, flat, desolate, windswept region, with a very high water table. Any diggings below ground, including shell holes and ditches, instantly filled with water. Tennant wrote:

43 TNA: WO95/1167, 1st Indian Cavalry Division War Diary, Memorandum Chief General Staff, 26 December.

44 TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary, 20 December-7 January 1915.

45 TNA: WO95/1176-3, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons War Diary, 12-14 January. My thanks to Alan Henshaw, Assistant Regimental Secretary/Curator, Royal Dragoon Guards for information relating to the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons.

> Even the very soil was unfriendly, resembling a consistency of grey mud and glue, clinging to everything touched. Trenches were generally in a deplorable condition. Originally, no doubt, suitably constructed, the snow and frost followed by thaw and torrents of rain caused the walls to disintegrate, the bottom converted into a mud channel into which the men's feet sank, so that they could no longer fire over the top. Widening the trenches only made them bigger shell traps.[46]

The ICC were used mainly in defensive fighting duties until February 1915. The two 2nd Division brigades arrived at Marseilles between the 14-16 December; being at its HQs in the Mametz area on 1 January.[47] The Inniskillings arrived at Marseilles on 14 December moving to the front on 31 December. The Mhow Brigade relieved the Lucknow Brigade (1st Division) in trenches in the Festubert area, having not experienced trench warfare. Regiments undertook patrols into no man's land, suffering casualties from shelling and bombing; but the heaviest losses came from flooded trench conditions, frost and snow.[48]

Troop movements, following arrival in France, record very little training with the newly issued Mark III rifle, the totally unfamiliar bayonet, or trench warfare. The 15th Lancers arrived in Marseilles on 28 September and were moving fairly constantly until the 26 October. Of the 66 days until the end of December approximately 36 days were in trenches and nine travelling. The machine gun section was loaned out for at least six days. One squadron spent about 30 days on escort duty to the ICC commanding officer. There are no references to training. The 34th Horse arrived in Marseilles on 14 October and were in the front area by 31 October. From then until the end of December about 17 days were in trenches, eight travelling, eight on working parties and four on inspections. The 1st Division arrived at Marseilles on the 10 November and record four days when ordered to be ready to move and possibly four days when some squadrons were training in the trenches. The Mhow Brigade were ordered to undertake bayonet instruction on 18 December, but departed for Orleans on the 21st, with no further reference to any training during 1914. The immediate move to active service suggests little time for training. Cavalry largely learnt on the field of battle.

Of the 39 peacetime British-Indian Army cavalry regiments stationed in India by the end of 1914, 20 were in France (14 Indian, six British).[49] Their arrival at the begin-

46 Tennant, *Royal Deccan Horse*, pp.21-22; Doherty and Donovan, *The Indian Corps,* pp.39-41.

47 Mhow and Meerut. Joined by the Secunderabad Brigade from 1 January to complete the three brigades of the Division.

48 TNA: WO95/ 1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary; TNA: WO95/1176, Mhow Brigade War Diary; TNA: WO95/1887, 9th Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade War Diary; TNA: WO95//1176-3, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons War Diary; Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, pp.298-9.

49 The ICC with 1st and 2nd Indian Cavalry Divisions. Some 11, 800 regimental horses plus artillery, transport horses and mules. See for example BL: L/Mil/17/5/3092, Indian

ning of trench warfare meant they were used as dismounted troops and as an effective mobile reserve (using horses and buses) when co-ordination and conditions allowed. The availability of an effective cavalry force, the only arm capable of exploiting any significant breakthrough during 1915, was crucial, although few opportunities were created, or exploited.[50]

January–November 1915

Training at all levels (including parades, schemes, manoeuvres and route marches), was a notable feature of activity during 1915. The winter period gave the newly arrived 2nd Division time for training that was denied the 1st Division during 1914. The 2nd Division had to organise new units such as field and signal squadrons; regimental reserve ammunition, signalling and regimental medical equipment.

The 2nd Division records 27 days brigade and regimental training during January to March. The Inniskillings undertook 47 days training, although the commanding officer decided (February) that as training days followed very similar lines they would not be referred to daily in the war diary. If similar decisions were taken elsewhere then the full record is not available. The 1st Division makes no mention of training, although one must assume it took place as the Secunderabad Brigade records February occupied in "war training". The 34th Horse makes no mention of training in January, but brigade and divisional training was undertaken according to weekly brigade issued programmes in February. During March only six days are specifically mentioned for training. In January training included instruction in Verey lights, bombs, grenades, mortars, dismounted attacks, practice night attacks, divisional route marches, inspections and parades. One divisional route march was for the benefit of six press reporters. The Inniskillings record learning their way about trenches and entrenching, dismounted attacks by wings, exercises, guard and patrol duties.[51] There are no references to rifle or bayonet practice. Inspections were fairly common. Field-Marshal Sir John French inspected the 2nd Division (18 January). The Prince of Wales watched a field exercise of the Meerut Brigade followed by an exercise of the Secunderabad Brigade (10-11 February). The Mhow and Secunderabad Brigades paraded for an inspection by Colonel Nikolof, Russian attaché, Colonel Inagaki and five Japanese attaches (25 March); there was also an inspection by US Military attaches.[52]

The 2nd Division were allocated trench digging for nine days from 5 March, when the Secunderabad were digging second line trenches; no reference is made to any

Expeditionary Force "A" War Diary, Vol.7, p.12, February, 1915, Appendix 28.

50 Commanders in early 1915 did not have the luxury of our hindsight as to the future role of cavalry, or the events of 1915.

51 TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary; TNA: WO95/1176-3, 6th(Inniskilling) Dragoons War Diary; TNA: WO95/1887-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary.

52 TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary, 25 March 1915.

further work until the 23-27 March. The Inniskillings were trench digging on 21 January, and on 25th with 100 men and two officers; digging by night on the 27th. The 1st Division was requested to assist with digging a defensive line but there is no record this took place. On 28 March work resumed on the defensive line; each brigade rostered to work for three days, but again nothing further is recorded. The Secunderabad refers to 600 men from brigade regiments despatched daily by motor bus for trench work, 9am to 5pm each day. A party of 200 men from the 34th Horse were digging trenches near Robecque for four days in March.[53]

The Sialkot Brigade, moved by buses into trench lines Givenchy-Festubert (7 January), under the British I Corps, were relieved two days later by the Lucknow Brigade. Machine gun sections from each regiment remained with the relieving brigade. German trenches were between 100-300 yards (92-274 metres) away. Several men in each unit became unfit for duty due to exhaustion and frostbite from the waterlogged trenches.[54] In the driest places water was knee deep, rising to three feet. Trenches held by the King's Dragoon Guards contained water up to waist height with a distinct flow south-north!

Lucknow Brigade casualties, 9-11 January, included six other ranks wounded and four missing in the King's Dragoon Guards; in the 29th Lancers two other ranks killed, 15 wounded and one missing; 36th Jacob's Horse two British officers wounded and one Indian officer, five other ranks killed, six wounded and six missing. 26 rifles were lost and 65 damaged, 59 bayonets lost and one revolver, all presumably related to the waterlogged trench conditions.[55]

On 11 January the Mhow and Meerut Brigades (900 strong) moved by buses to Bethune, then by foot into the trenches, for a period of 48 hours each, relieving the Lucknow Brigade. Each regiment had one squadron in the front trenches, the remainder in support. As the advanced trenches contained waist high water they were only occupied by a lookout. Divisional orders stated arrangements were to be made for bringing coal and coke for use in braziers. Sentries were to be posted watching for enemy aeroplanes. If spotted warning was to be given by a whistle when all would take cover and keep still. Only supports could fire on aircraft and then only by order of an officer, owing to the difficulty in recognizing friendly from hostile aircraft.[56] On being relieved by the Meerut Brigade the sowars had difficulty marching from the buses to their billets being stiff and numb from cold.[57] Carver wrote that he was "rather tired but very fit":

53 North west of Bethune.
54 18 men in the 17th Lancers, 31 in 6th Cavalry and 25 in 19th Lancers.
55 103, 703 rifle ammunition rounds were expended during this period in the trenches.
56 TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary , Operational Order No.1. No civilians except those in possession of a pass were to be admitted near the Brigade.
57 Mhow Casualties: one sowar of the 38th Central Indian horse.

> We have been into the trenches … We paraded at 9 o'clock on Monday morning and were taken to a town about six miles away from the firing line, by London motor buses. It was a very funny sight to see them all in a long line, painted a sort of drab colour and all the men cheered them. We got to this place about 1pm, all had lunch and moved off on foot to the trenches. We all had a lot to carry. I had my cloak, revolver, haversack, rifle and bayonet and a bandolier with 90 rounds of ammunition. The men had two bandoliers and two coats… It was a miserable march but the men sang till we got within two miles of the front where we had to stay and wait until dark. It poured with rain and we were all soaked. Then we had to push on again. This time in single file and when we got within one mile, we walked through water up to our ankles. I think we were all frightened because star shells kept dropping near us and they make a bright light and search lights were swung around looking for us. We have to lie down when we see them coming our way … At last got to a ruined village just behind the trenches. There were a great many German snipers about and their bullets kept coming pretty close. Then our first squadron to go into the advanced trenches moved off and about half an hour after the regiment, which we relieved, came by us, going home. I think this was when I first realised that war was a hard thing to bear, because the ones (King's Dragoon Guards) who had just come out of the trenches were all doubled up and some of the men were simply sobbing with the pain of cold, wet, legs and thighs. The system on which we held the trenches for 48 hours was this – two squadrons went in at a time, one in the advanced trenches and the other in support trenches just to the rear. Each squadron did two shifts of 12 hours each. There is no very great danger in the trenches but the snipers who are in between the advanced trenches and the support have a shot at you when you walk from trench to trench. I was frightened as a mouse walking along the road with the star shells coming down all round but after that none of us cared two pins about them or the snipers or anyone else. It is simply a matter of getting accustomed to them … The whole trouble about the trenches is that they are wet, but our own men stood it very well indeed and we had no casualties. We caught four German snipers though. To give you an idea of the mud and water, one man had got so firmly fixed in the trench that he had to be pulled out by no less than five men. To tell the truth I enjoyed the experience very much and I am very glad to have been broken to fire now in this gentle harmless way … The German guns could only drop one shell to every four of ours and they were erratic (thank goodness). They never got within less than 50 yards (46 metres) of us. The march back of six miles to the buses was very trying as many of us could not feel our legs at all, but we managed it alright and I for one sang all the way back to our billets.[58]

58 Carver, Letter, Thursday 14 January 1915.

The Meerut Brigade experienced heavier shelling from shrapnel and high explosive, "our field and heavy artillery appearing to make very good practice on enemy trenches, some 100yds (91metres) from ours".[59] One brigade of the Corps was placed on two hours readiness to move from the 13 January, beginning with the 1st Division. The Corps being placed in readiness to move at two hours notice on the 29th and 30th, and five hours from 2 February. On the 16 February the 2nd Division was instructed to reinforce First Army, then later Second Army, although no movement took place until 10 March.

The Battle of Neuve Chapelle (10-13 March)

The first large scale British offensive of 1915 was planned to break through the German line on a narrow front, take the high ground at Aubers Ridge and eventually Lille. The IAC, holding the line Neuve Chapelle-Givenchy, formed part of the First Army attack. Neuve Chapelle was to be attacked by the Meerut Division. Indian and British Cavalry Corps were held in reserve at the disposal of the Commander-in-Chief, ready to exploit the expected gap, wheeling along the ridge into open country behind German lines Neuve Chapelle-La Bassee. Although the village and trenches around Neuve Chapelle, a front of 328 yards (300m), were taken on the 10th, little progress was made after these initial gains and there was no breakthrough towards Lille.

The 15th Lancers in billets about eight miles (13kms) north of Bethune were suddenly ordered to proceed mounted to reinforce the Lahore Division in the neighbourhood of Neuve Chapelle (12 March).[60] The whole day and night was spent in reserve with the 4th Cavalry, ready to advance if the opportunity arose. The regiment returned to billets on the 13th less its machine gun section.[61] A report forwarded to Sir John French highlighted the work of the machine gun sections of 4th Cavalry and 15th Lancers at Neuve Chapelle.[62]

On the 8 March the 34th Horse was placed on 35 minutes readiness until 9-10 March, when ordered to Le Marquet Wood on the 11th. Orders were issued on the 9 March placing the 2nd Division at six hours readiness to move. The ICC moved on the 11th reaching positions of readiness by 8am; the 1st Division placed in the Bois Des Dames and 2nd Division in Le Marequet Wood (SW Bethune) about 15

59 Carver, ibid. When relieved the Brigade had suffered casualties of: 3rd Horse, one sowar killed, three reported missing but expected to rejoin as they had been seen in the trenches; one sowar in 18th Lancers with a superficial wound.

60 Billets at Lestrem, about seven miles (11kms) from Neuve Chapelle. TNA: WO95/3918-1, 15th Lancers War Diary.

61 Attached to the Black Watch, 21st Bareilly Brigade.

62 BL:L/Mil/17/5/3093, Indian Expeditionary Force "A" War Diary, Vol. 8, p.65, 20 March 1915, Appendix 167, Willcocks IAC to Sir John French.

miles (24kms) SW of Neuve Chapelle and 15 miles from Aubers.[63] Regiments were concealed in the woods from German aircraft during daylight, but ready to exploit any opportunities for an advance. After dark brigades moved back to billets.[64] Brigade commanders could exercise discretion to leave horses in the woods under guard during the night, or take them back to billets. At 3.30pm (11th) brigades were allowed out of concealment, the Mhow and Meerut choosing to stay in the woods. Turnout was extended to two hours. After three days hidden in the woods and failure of the attack on Aubers Ridge orders were received for the Corps to march to extended billeting areas after dark on 14th.[65] On the 19th after a cold night and slight fall of snow readiness was extended to six hours.[66] The Inniskillings moved to Lozinghem on the 9 March then 12.5 miles (20kms) south of Thérouanne.[67] From early in the month, the regiment had been on two hours' notice and after Neuve Chapelle remained on standby at two to six hours' notice for the remainder of the month. During April they were engaged in trench digging, even filling in practice trenches.

The Second Battle of Ypres (22-25 May)

The battle opened on the 17 April with the British capture of Hill 60.[68] The Germans opened a bombardment on the allied front lines on the 22 April followed by the release of gas opposite French Colonial troops (African Division), to the left of the British V Corps, behind which German troops attacked supported by a heavy artillery bombardment. The French line broke and reserves, including the ICC, were hurriedly moved to support the exposed flanks. The Lahore Division was suddenly ordered to reinforce the Second Army in the vicinity of Ypres and immediately went into action. The 15th Lancers were placed in readiness about five miles SW of Ypres. They sent out three patrols with an infantry brigade of the division, but took no part in the battle though the patrols suffered some casualties in horses and wounded men.[69]

63 ICC, Operation Order No.1, 10 March 1915.
64 The Secunderabad (with Jodhpur Lancers attached) in the village of Allouagne, west of Bethune (about two miles west of Le Marequet Wood), Mhow in Lozingham and the Meerut behind the wood.
65 The 2nd Division to Norrent Fontes, on the 15th, where notice to move was extended to four hours; then to Roquetoire on the 18th.
66 TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary, March 1915, pp.10-12, ICC Operation Order No.1 (Appendix 4), 10 March, and Operational Order No.3 (Appendix 5), Appendix 6, 14 March; Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, pp.229-300.
67 TNA: WO95/1176, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons War Diary, regimental strength recorded as: 27 Officers, 515 men and 577 horses.
68 TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary; Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, p.300.
69 TNA: WO95/3918-1, 15th Lancers War Diary. In the vicinity of Oudredom, 24-25 April 1915.

The Corps moved close to Ypres during a chaotic night march on the 24 April. The 2nd Division having been placed at two hours readiness to move (9am on the 24th) and was then ordered (2.20pm) to move immediately to an area SW of Cassel in support of the Second Army. The Meerut Brigade was trench digging at Robecq when recalled (returning to billets about 2.30-3pm). The last Mhow brigade arrived at their billets by 1.30am. Clearly two hours' notice was insufficient for a rapid concentration and move. The transport for all units was blocked on the roads; the Division not arriving until after daylight.[70] The Inniskillings were placed on two hours' notice to move at 4pm on the 24th. Saddling up they moved to the Brigade concentration area moving about 15 miles (24kms) north of St. Omer arriving 11pm then marching (25th) about 31 miles (50kms) into Belgium, NW of Ypres.[71] On the 27 April the Corps was still waiting in reserve at an hour's notice. On the 28th the 2nd Division rendezvoused at its HQs then marched to billets ("good many refugees on roads in villages from Ypres and Poperinghe") at half an hour's notice to move.[72]

During May the Corps was continually on two and four hours' notice. 1 May the 2nd Division moved to the Cassel area, moving twice again, ending at billets in the Wandone area. 1st Division moved from Watou to billets around Cassel, back to Watou then to billets in the Roquetoure area on the 5th. Three squadrons of the Corps's British Cavalry were ordered to the First Army for road control (returning 25 May). Carver wrote:

> Back in France again after having done nothing. The day before yesterday we left Belgium at 8 pm, did a 25 mile (40kms) march and got here at 5am next morning. We all felt fearfully sleepy in the small hours. I went to sleep on my horse for a minute or two but it is rather dangerous work. We are now standing to at three hours' notice. That means we are given three hours' notice before turning out ready to move somewhere else. It is rather a relief. For the last fortnight we have been at half an hours' notice and that means of course one can't undress at night. Half an hour isn't too much time to get the saddles packed, saddle up the horses and pack away all the men's kit.[73]

70 TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary. HQ at Wemaers Capell.

71 TNA: WO95/1176, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons War Diary. Lambres about 7.5 miles (12kms) moving from Mhow concentration area to Zuytpeene north of St Omer; then to Poperinge and Woeston. Regimental strength: 29 officers, 510 men, 20 ASC, 4 interpreters, 7 Supply and Transport (total 560); 565 riding horses, 20 ASC, 4 ponies, 10 Supply and Transport mules, 22 Ammunition Column (total 621).

72 TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary. Marching approximately 19 miles (30kms). Billets west of the Watou–Houtkerque road with the horses and some men in the open.

73 Carver, Letter, 7 May 1915.

The Battle of Aubers Ridge (9 May)

Other than being placed on two hours' notice to move the Corps did not participate in this action. Both Divisions loaned their RHA batteries to First Army from 2-24 May, covering the actions at both Aubers Ridge and Festubert.[74] The 15th Lancers, less one detached squadron (for prisoner duty), assembled in readiness but returned to billets, except the machine gun section.[75]

The Battle of Festubert (15-27 May)

With the opening of the battle, the Corps moved (17 May) to an assembly area in the same woods around Lozinghem-Lapugnoy it had waited in during March at Neuve Chapelle.[76] Both Divisions were back in billets on the 19 May.[77] The 1st Division was placed under Second Army, moving to an area west of Cassel.[78] The frustration of constantly moving location with no results was summed up:

> This is the third time the Indian Cavalry Corps has been moved closer to the front lines only to be denied action, this time due to bad weather… month ended like others in training and horse shows and the arrival of a horse drawn ambulance.[79]

The 15th Lancers was placed in readiness on the 16 May, as the Lahore Division took part in further attacks, but remained in billets except for a detached squadron on prisoner duty and three patrols one with each infantry brigade.[80]

The 1st Division moved into billets around Vlamertinghe as a reserve to V Corp under the 3rd Cavalry Division to gain trench experience. Orders were issued for taking every opportunity to make officers and a proportion of NCOs acquainted with the front line and area occupied by V Corps, east of Ypres. It was important to be able

74 "X" Battery, 2nd Division. TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary, records 4 killed and all available ammunition expended.
75 The Lahore Division took part in the general attack on the 9th. The section remained with the Jullundur Brigade on the 10th returning on 26th being relieved by a section of a motor machine gun battery.
76 TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary, ICC Operation Order No.3, 17 May, Appendix 24.
77 The 1st Division moved to Allouagne (17th) then back to Roquetoure (19th). The 2nd Division to Le Marequet Wood, Lozingham, then billets in Bomy (19th).
78 25th-29th. Bussed at Rubrouck for Brandhoek into V Corps reserve (25 men per bus, with one man in four left in billets with the horses) bivouacking at Reninghelst on the 29th. Divisional strength is given as 134 British and 61 Indian officers, 2090 rifles, 124 men and 18 machine guns, less RHA and Sappers.
79 TNA: WO95/1176, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons War Diary, 19 May 1915.
80 TNA: WO95/3918-1, 15th Lancers War Diary.

to select the safest bridges and approaches generally from the west of Ypres towards the trench line for use by troops and transport. Each night a proportion of brigade officers went into the trenches for familiarisation. The King's Dragoon Guards moved to trench works at Hooge Chateau (31 May-2 June). Casualties during this period were: one officer killed and five wounded, 60 other ranks killed and wounded. On 3 June the whole Division was back in billets placed at two hours' notice of readiness. On the 7th and 13th the Division's camps were shelled sustaining a small number of casualties in men and animals. The Ambala Brigade machine gun section was loaned to 5th Division (11-14 June). The Lucknow Brigade suffered 83 casualties between 27 May-15 June. A change of billets saw the division providing trench working parties for the First Army during June and July.[81] The 34th Horse does not record any activity for June, but 22 days in July were taken up with trench working parties. From the end of June into July brigades of 2nd Division provided working parties in the Vermelles area.[82] The Inniskillings provided trench working parties for at least seven days for the First Army; 38 days were largely spent on squadron training, including machine gun practice, route marches, Corps horseshow, inspections and parades. Interestingly a scheme had been drawn up placing a number of men at the disposal of farmers to help with the hay harvest. Carver wrote:

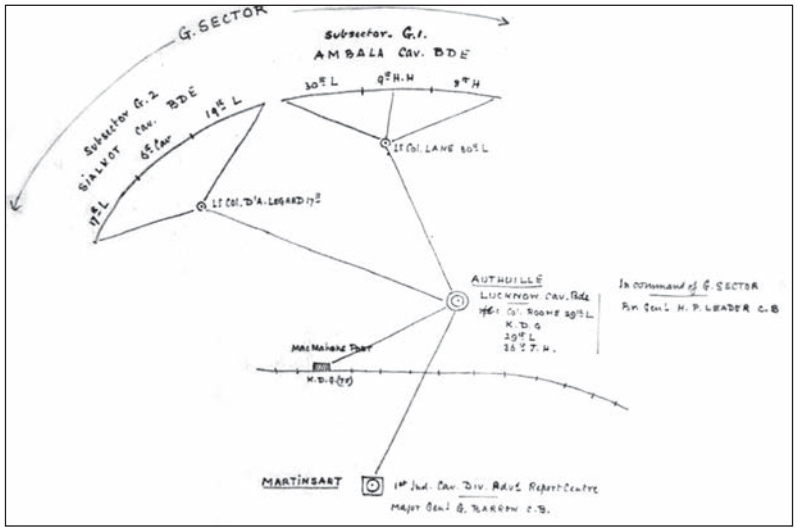
> Things are just a bit more lively now … the Regiment was digging trenches behind the firing line … I am happy to say that I shall be going up to do the same on Saturday. It will be a great relief from this hum-drum existence here.

Followed by:

> Busy. Digging trenches takes up about five hours or six of the day and one is looking after the men most of the rest of the time. The village gets shelled pretty regularly, so one of us is always with them in case something happens. We had one man wounded today.[83]

The 15th Lancers continued to find men for trench duty (often about 120 rifles), or in reserve with the Lahore Division during June-September. The machine gun section was more or less continually serving in front line trenches.[84] During August into September the ICC was in the Martinsart-Authuille area (Somme) with the two divisions alternating periods in the trenches. The three 1st Division RHA batteries

81 Billets at Roquetoire. TNA: WO95/1167, 1st Indian Cavalry Division War Diary; Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, pp.300-1.
82 Six miles (9.7kms) south east of Bethune.
83 Carver, Letter, 13 July and Thursday (no date given), 1915.
84 TNA: WO95/3918-1, 15th Lancers War Diary.



1st Indian Cavalry Division: Trench dispositions August–September, 1915 in X Corps area. (TNA: WO 95/1167, 1st Indian Cavalry Division War Diary).

were allotted to Third Army.[85] The 2nd Division and Sialkot Brigade moved into X Corps area trenches NE of Authuille (Martinsart on the 8th). The 34th Horse moved into trenches on 11-14 August until 22-23 August, then provided trench working parties between 25th-28th.

The Inniskillings undertook specific trench warfare training during August such as a gas demonstration for all officers and 20 NCOs per squadron and a regimental machine gun parade for field firing practice; practice with smoke helmets and attacks from dugouts. On 14 August the Mhow Brigade moved into trenches in the Martinsart area. The Inniskillings provided two squadrons for the fire trenches and two in support (15-22 August). Work included digging parties improving fire, support and communication trenches and bridging.[86] The regiment was relieved by the King's Dragoon Guards.[87] From the 24 -31 August 150 men went daily at 6pm to dig Corps trench lines at Senlis from 8am-12noon. The regiment (less digging party) was back in the trenches from the 3-12 September relieving the 8th Hussars (Ambala Brigade), with "C" and "D" squadrons in the fire trenches. Once relieved by the 8th

85 "A" and "Q" RHA batteries were allotted to 5th Division, Third Army, on 8 August. "U" battery on 24th. All batteries appear to be back with the 1st Division by 22 September.
86 Two men per squadron and one officer participated in a three day bomb throwing course.
87 All baggage was removed by mules. The men marched to Engelbelmer met their horses and rode to billets at Beaucourt. The horse conducting party moving back to permanent billets leaving 300 horses and men, returning with the horses when the trench party moved back into the trenches.

Hussars they moved to Engelbelmer met their horses and rode to billets. Casualties: 14 wounded 1 killed.[88]

Some of the pressure and propaganda methods used by the Germans on Indian troops in the hope of stirring up anti-British resentment and desertion can be seen in two trench incidents. Three small flags (Union Jack, German and one blue and Yellow), were placed opposite the 3rd (Skinner's) Horse. A notice board was erected and from what could be deciphered referred to recent victories over the Russians. Also a small Turkish flag was placed opposite the 13th Hussars and 3rd Horse (Mohammedans).[89]

The Battle of Loos (25-28 September)

Known by the British as the Third battle of Artois, this was the last major battle fought by the IAC in France. The British offensive was to complement a French attempt to break through German defences in Artois and Champagne. The British First Army and the French Tenth Army were to attack between Arras and La Bassee Canal in the West. Three cavalry corps (French, British and Indian), were to be ready to exploit any breakthrough. The ICC was concentrated in the vicinity of Doullens (SW of Arras) and the British Cavalry Corps around St. Pol, both ready to co-operate with the French Cavalry in exploiting any success. The main infantry attack opened on 25 September and although important gains were made, no breakthrough occurred and the cavalry moved back to billets. For the next two months the ICC made numerous changes of billets, particularly to provide trench digging parties. By December the Corps was in winter quarters west of Doullens.[90]

The IAC held a line north of Neuve Chapelle to the La Bassee Canal. The 15th Lancers played an "unfortunately very small part" in the Battle of Loos. They were placed in a state of readiness at Vieille Chapelle to advance about six miles (9kms) in the direction of Lorgies, to exploit any breakthrough, "enabling the regiment to carry out its proper cavalry duties". This did not happen and they returned to billets on the 25th resuming trench duties. The Lancers were not employed tactically during October, remaining in billets. The Lahore Division was taken out of the front line on 8 November and with the Lancers moved to new billets before reaching Marseilles for embarkation to Egypt on 26 December.[91]

The 2nd Division moved south of Bernaville (east of Abbeville) about 58 miles (92kms) from Loos, to an area around Ribeaucourt 60 miles (98kms) from Loos (22

88 The Ambala Brigade transferred to 2nd Division and Mhow to 1st Division.
89 TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary, 17-19 August. It was thought the Germans were aware of units opposite them from unit colours worn on soldier straps.
90 Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, pp.301-2.
91 TNA: WO98/3918-1, 15th Lancers War Diary, 30 September 1915. Vieille Chapelle about four miles south of its billets at Lestrem, about two miles (3kms) from Neuve Chapelle and about seven miles (11.3kms) north east of Bethune.

September). On 23rd the Division was placed on 3.5 hours' notice to march, then 1.5 hours, back to 3.5 hours on the 25th. The Divisional war diary contains little of note during the period of the Battle of Loos. For example, the "arrival of six Vickers machine guns per brigade", "nothing to report during last four days"; "reports received twice daily on progress of Allied armies" and "very wet cold weather, troops and horses in great discomfort". On the 3 October notice to move was 5.5 hours and 11.5 hours on the 10th. On 22 October the Division moved into winter quarters around Ouisemont.[92]

Following an inspection of the ICC by Lord Kitchener (21 September) the 1st Division moved to new billets west of Doullens about 50 miles (80kms) from Loos.[93] The Division remained in billets from the end of September and month of October; being placed at various hours of readiness to march, from 3.5 to 11 hours until 10 October.[94] The whole of October was taken up with training, parades and exercises. The Inniskillings moved on the 22 October (to Bernaville) with divisional drill enroute, then rest and an inspection of equipment. There were regimental parades on 25th-27th and 29 October, a brigade parade on the 28th and squadron training. The Regiment moved north of Bernaville (Frohen Le Grand) and was placed on 2.5 hours' notice, moving about 33 miles (53kms) south west of Amiens for trench digging.[95] The war diaries make no reference to the Regiment, or Mhow Brigade, being in action, or sustaining casualties. A further move of 21 miles (33kms) was made north to Surcamps, returning to Hornoy. Troops were constantly involved in corps, brigade and squadron training and exercises.

Although the ICC was officially held in reserve for the Loos offensive to exploit a break in the German line, their geographic location suggests any such movement could not have been immediate. There was a minimum of 1.5 hours' notice for concentration then a march of at least 50-60 miles to Loos. A cavalry division occupied nearly ten miles (16kms) of road space. Each unit within the ICC received detailed marching timetables, routes and billeting maps, thereby alleviating potential road congestion.[96] At least 24 hours' notice would be required before any actual exploitation could begin, possibly 48 hours. Horses would be tired from the march carrying men and equipment. It is possible the Corps was more readily placed to support French rather than

92 TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary 10 miles south of Abbeville and 25 miles (40kms) west of Amiens.
93 TNA: WO95/1167, 1st Indian Cavalry Division War Diary, 30th-31st around Lemeillard.
94 Division moving to new billeting area LeQuesnoy on 23 October.
95 Around Hornoy and Bezencourt.
96 A RHA column alone took up approximately 2, 500yds (2, 286 metres). Winton, *Theirs not to Reason Why*, p.199. The regulation spacing between riding horses in column was one yard, *Field Service Pocket Book, 1914*, p.37.

British units, but its location around Doullens is somewhat isolated compared with the British Cavalry Corps at St. Pol.[97]

During November and December the 1st Division was mostly in billets undertaking training and parades. Brigade machine gun squadrons were formed of six sections with two guns each. A Divisional Trench Warfare School opened at Liomer (15 miles (24kms) south of Abbeville), the first course beginning 29 November. Each brigade was to detail two officers per British regiment, one British officer and one Indian officer per Indian regiment and four NCOs. Officers were allowed one horse and one servant and the four NCOs one cook to look after kit. The course classes, lasting 10 working days, including lectures and practical sessions on trenches and layouts, revetments and drainage, shelters, working parties, defence of villages and woods, attack and counter attack, tools and materials, obstacles and laying crinoline wire, making knife rests and wire entanglements, co-operation with artillery, explosives and bombs.[98] The Inniskillings supplied trench working parties for two days in November. The remainder of the time was taken up with inspections, section horse competitions, an officers' charger parade, church and other parades. Training included attack and bomb throwing, sapping and construction trenches, a regimental outpost scheme, bombing and signalling; foot drill and classes in scouting, sketching and first aid. Sports days were also included in Corps exercise programmes. Haig attended a regimental concert and there was the opening of a men's and an officer's club. The 2nd Division records daily training including, mounted work over fields, mounted and dismounted work.

An ICC "Dismounted Division" was formed during November, under the command of General Cookson, "should the Division be required". The division was not actually to be formed until the occasion arose for its employment, but all details and organisation were worked out in advance, enabling them to become effective at the shortest possible notice. The Dismounted Division consisted of two brigades, each of three regiments of three squadrons. Each machine gun detachment and dismounted squadron was formed from one regiment, each from one brigade, each from one division. The division would include RHA, transport and a mobile veterinary section, HQs, engineer transport, riding and transport horses/mules and administrative units. The names of all commanders and officers for brigade and regimental HQs and squadron commanders were to be supplied to Corps HQs. A British Cavalry Corps, "Dismounted Cavalry Division", was formed by December 1915 and on active service by January 1916. None of the regiments listed in the Order of Battle were from the ICC.[99]

97 Correspondence with David Kenyon; Marquess of Anglesey, *A History of British Cavalry*, Vol.8, (London: Leo Cooper, 1997), p.26.

98 TNA: WO95/1167, 1st Indian Cavalry Division War Diary, 21 November 1915, Appendix 81.

99 Ibid., 8 to 23 November, 9 November, Appendix 78, Copy Memorandum of 8 November from ICC; TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary, 23 November;

The chief arm of the cavalry soldier is his horse[100]

The magnitude of the maritime contribution in moving the IEFA to France is often overlooked. Given the number of men, animals, stores and equipment involved, the evidence suggests it was a relatively smooth and efficient operation. Commercial shipping was taken for military transports as it arrived into Indian ports. Fittings, such as animal stalls, had been the main difficulty, as prior to the war India only maintained 620 mule and 700 horse fittings in Bombay. All Government dockyards, Port Trusts, railway, sapper and miners' workshops since the issue of mobilisation orders worked continually making up fittings. If animals were to cross the Arabian Sea alive during the monsoon it was deemed essential that all mule and horse fittings were complete and thoroughly reliable.[101] The Secunderabad Brigade sailed from Bombay with veterinary officers distributed amongst the transports as the remainder of the veterinary section were left behind due to an outbreak of small pox. The Brigade reported that 18 horses died on the worst day off Aden as stalls were without ventilation. This loss was considered avoidable if the ships had been more effectively converted for horse transports with improved cleaning and hygiene systems, including shovels and brooms for litter (manure) removal, spanners and saws for refining horse boxes.[102]

The period off Aden in the Red Sea and Port Said would appear to have been the most difficult for the horses of most brigades. Intensive heat, temperatures ranging from the 80 to a maximum of 94 degrees Fahrenheit; as many horses as possible were taken on deck for air.[103] Captain Grimshaw, 34th Horse (which lost seven horses) met his regiment at Port Said, where he inspected the horses. He thought those that had

TNA: WO95/1189/15-16 Cavalry Corps Dismounted Cavalry Division, First and Second Dismounted Brigades War Diary; Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform,* p.257.

100 Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform,* p.274, National Army Museum, Bateman papers: Cavalry School Netheravon Course Exercise Book, August 1916.

101 BL:L/MIL/17/5/3087, Indian Expeditionary Force "A" War Diaries, Vol.II, p.11, 2 September, Appendix 11. My thanks to Andy Smerdon for sharing his expertise on military mules.

102 TNA: WO95/1887, 9th Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade War Diary, 6 October. Report of shipping horses written Mediterranean Sea south of Italy. This entry then forms part of a report, sent by the GOC of the Secunderabad Brigade, 18 September, in reply to the QMG India's request, for suggestions as to the suitability of the Indian Force transports and their fittings for the conveyance of horses. The QMG, India quickly responded to the Director, Royal Indian Marine, Bombay, for improvements in defective ventilation. Arrangements were to be made so horses were not placed in a part of the ship without satisfactory ventilation and the authorised proportion of spare stalls provided, unless unforeseen circumstances prevent. BL: L/MIL/17/5/3088, Indian Expeditionary Force "A" War Diaries, Vol.III, p.15, 4-5 October, Appendix 25, & 26 October, Appendix165; Tennant, *Royal Deccan Horse*, pp.11-12.

103 TNA: WO95/1187, 34th Poona Horse War Diary, September, pp.15-17.

been kept outside in pelting rain two weeks before embarkation from India suffered most on the sea journey, including those of his own squadron.[104]

On arrival at Marseilles some horses were piquetted outside in constant heavy rain. Regular exercising for the horses was difficult and appears to have been done in hand with the horses on reins. Grimshaw also commented on receiving orders for another change in fodder for the horses, "back on grain after being accustomed to oats how can one expect to keep animals fit and well!" During the train journey from Marseilles to Orleans halts were made every 3-4 hours every day, other halts for watering about every hour.[105] The Inniskillings departed from Bombay in two ships as part of a convoy of 24 with 485 horses and recorded a good voyage with the loss of only three horses.[106]

Animals transported from India via Egypt to Marseilles, travelled a distance of about 5,300 miles, changing hemispheres and climates. Leaving the heat of India and Egypt and moving into the cold, damp wet, winter conditions of France was problematic. Acclimatisation and recuperation would be vital if the Army was to have an effective cavalry force. As British-Indian Army cavalry relied solely on animal power for transporting supplies and equipment, any failure to supply fit and healthy animals would render them inefficient in the theatre of war. This was clearly shown when two brigades of the 1st Division were delayed reaching the front owing to sickness amongst transport horses.[107] Carver wrote that the train to Orleans was "nearly half a mile long (you see the horses take up so much room) and we move no faster than a luggage train". The camp at Orleans was nine miles away:

> We had to lead the horses all the way … We found nothing for us. The horses had to be jacketed, watered and fed and we were not finished till ten thirty. None of us had had any food since the day before … They feel the cold a great deal because they have come straight from India. The horses are worst off. They are standing in inches of mud with soaking rugs on their backs to the wind and the

104 Grimshaw, *Indian Cavalry Officer*, 6 October, p.63.

105 Ibid., pp.23, 26; TNA: WO95/1187, 34th Poona Horse War Diary, 22 October.

106 TNA: WO95/1176, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons War Diary. On departure for Orleans it's strength was 559 horses, 3 ponies and 46 mules.

107 25 November, Sialkot and Lucknow Brigades were delayed leaving Orleans owing to a fresh outbreak of pink eye (conjunctivitis, an inflammation of the conjunctiva, which can be highly infectious) in draught-transport horses from Le Havre. The Division was informed 353 horses had been sent to them and no fit horses remained at HQ, but everything possible was being done to obtain more, hopefully from Rouen. On 1 December a batch of 221 horses were at Rouen, having landed four days previously at Le Havre but the whole batch was infected. The brigades finally entrained 5 December. GHQ was to be notified of the absolute necessity for improving arrangements under which horses were sent from England. TNA: WO95/1167, 1st Indian Cavalry Division War Diary; Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, p.293.

> rain … here has been plenty of work to do here up to the present. Looking after the horses and getting all the saddlery and arms cleaned and fit for service.[108]

Surprisingly, the records of many cavalry regiments contain little information about their horses during transportation and on campaign. Horses were obviously ridden into forward positions for use in mounted action and on scouting patrols for which a number of casualties are recorded. They were also used as a means of transport in moving men from billets to as close to the front line as possible, either for trench duty or digging parties, with a proportion of troopers, or sowars, detailed as horse holders. Conducting parties would take the animals back to billets until needed. It is difficult to piece together a detailed picture of the condition of riding and transport horses/mules on active service during 1915. There are many references to billeting where horses are often in the open in all weathers, which affected their health and capacity to perform in the field. In December 1914 although the camp at Orleans was deep in mud the "horses nevertheless look well and hard".[109] In 2nd Division billets at Ribeaucourt the area for billeting was extended so all men and some horses were under cover, but the majority still stood out and no winter rugs had been issued.[110] As horsemastership was very high in Indian regiments, no doubt helped by the use of syces, this may have mitigated against some of the more serious problems. The many references during 1915 to Indian Cavalry organising horse shows, parades, mounted sports and some polo games may seem frivolous, but such activities were an effective way of keeping horses healthy and fit.

An adequate supply of clean water was essential for keeping animals in good condition. There are a number of references to changes of billets, where possible, due to a poor water supply. Billets at Bezencourt were stated to be good with plenty of water for the horses.[111] The quantity and quality of fodder supply, supplemented by grazing, varied throughout the period. India shipped a reserve of 30 days baled fodder for animal's en-route to Egypt, from where the WO would then supply all fodder. In November the WO informed India that no more barley, hay and gram should be supplied as they were supplying the IEFA.[112]

At the end of March the Inniskillings reported there was no straw and hay was rationed to 10 lbs per horse; by April the weather was good and spring like with good grazing for the animals. Carver wrote after a horse parade that the:

> Horses were looking miserable. For some extraordinary reason they don't give us enough forage for them and we all buy a good deal for them ourselves. Otherwise

108 Carver, Letters, 16 and 23 December 1914.
109 TNA: WO95/1180-1, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division War Diary, December 1914.
110 Ibid., October 1914.
111 TNA: WO95/1176, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons War Diary, October 1914.
112 BL:L/MIL/17/5/3086, Indian Expeditionary Force "A" War Diaries, Vol.1, p.93, 25 August, Appendix.100 & BL: L/MIL/17/5/3089, Vol. IV, 6 November, Appendix 55.

A troop of Jodhpur Lancers coming into action dismounted; Linghem, France 28 July 1915. This is probably a training photograph to be used for propaganda purposes. (British Library: Girdwood Collection 24-150)

> they would be in even worse condition than they are now. When I say 'condition' I mean the horses are thin though I believe they are fairly hardened.

This was followed by a request for his parents to send some Elliman's Embrocation for his horses.[113] Disease was limited with few outbreaks of mange and glanders, which were treated quickly and effectively.[114] In June 1915 the Inniskillings suffered an outbreak of mange. Veterinary officers inspected all animals and as a result 13 horses were evacuated and 22 mules taken off the strength, all saddles and blankets were disinfected; in July 28 horses were evacuated. During the last week in December

113 TNA: WO95/1176, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons War Diary, March-April 1915; Carver, Letters, 21 April & 7 May, 1915. The Elliman family moved to Slough in 1845 when James Elliman Snr established a drapery business and developed his embrocation, first sold in 1847 for animals. By 1850 it was being sold for use by humans to help aching muscles and joints. By 1911 two types of the embrocation were being sold in 42 countries, 'Universal' for humans and 'Royal' for animals with no difference between the two. It remained a family business until 1961 when taken over by Horlicks and is now made by GlaxoSmithKline, www.sloughhistoryonline.org.uk/Elliman, sons & Co.

114 Mange: parasitic skin disease not usually fatal. Glanders: seriously infectious disease common in wartime, can result in large numbers of animals being destroyed if not dealt with quickly and effectively. TNA: WO95/1177, Mhow Cavalry Brigade Mobile Veterinary Section War Diary, May 1915; TNA: WO95/1188, Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade Mobile Veterinary Section War Diary, 6 April 1915.

all horses were mallein tested for glanders with about a dozen destroyed of 7,000 tested.[115]

A vital element in horses remaining healthy and fit for purpose is effective shoeing. In September 1914 India requested the WO provide frost nails for mounted units. These were not available in India and needed to be provided in time for the winter. The estimated numbers required were: 72,000 pony nails, 2.5 million nails for horses and 8,500 for mules if they required shoeing in Europe.[116] Carver refers to using village forges to get "all the horses shod satisfactorily".[117]

The requirement for military harness and saddlery to bring units up to war strength, replace unserviceable equipment and then sustain units in the field immediately created a supply problem. In addition to supplying its own units, notably some Silladar cavalry regiments, India received a request from the WO to supply them as early as possible with some 35,000 sets of harness and saddlery. India experienced difficulty in finding the leather but agreed to supply this initial request over an eight month period.[118] It is perhaps surprising that by the end of October 1914 India claimed it could not meet the supply for scabbards, swords and lances as the home supply was exhausted. This was followed by a request that the WO supply Indian cavalry in Europe and Egypt with spurs (British cavalry pattern) due to a lack of stock in India. The WO was informed that all lance heads obtainable in India were required to equip reinforcements for France and they had been forced to order a further quantity from England.[119]

For British cavalry regiments stationed in England, the casting of horses at a certain age and replacement with remounts, on an annual basis, was strictly controlled. The British Army controlled their regiments forming part of the British-Indian Army. The unique Indian silladar system did not allow for such central controls as regiments owned their own horses.[120] This is made very clear in India's response (15 October) to the WO request to send a second cavalry division to France. By completing the 1st Cavalry Division, regiments in India had already been depleted of horses and men.

115 TNA: WO95/1176, 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons War Diary; TNA: WO95/1177, Mhow Cavalry Brigade Mobile Veterinary Section War Diary, 24-25 December 1915.

116 BL:L/MIL/17/5/3087, Indian Expeditionary Force "A" War Diaries, Vol. II, p.76, 17 September 1914, Appendix109.

117 Carver, Letter, 23 December 1914.

118 BL:L/Mil/17/5/3086, Indian Expeditionary Force "A" War Diaries, Vol.1, p.96, 31 August, Appendix 138, for purchase from Messrs Cooper and Allen and Co, Cawnpore. The Government of India was to order for the WO, to inspect and ship. India replied 7 September, Vol.II, p.34 Appendix 52, that as equipment became available it would ship by 15 January, 10,000 sets universal saddlery and commence shipping the remaining 25,000 sets artillery harness from February when the maximum monthly consignments would be made with final completion expected about September 1915.

119 BL:L/MIL/17/5/3088, ibid., Vol.III, 31 October, Appendix 201, & Vol.V, 30 December 1914, Appendix 296.

120 The Indian Government's control of "Indian Army" horses only related to the three non-silladar regiments.

This depletion would continue, with only a negligible reserve, as there was no other source from which India could horse its regiments and supply the WO with trained remounts to replace wastage. A sowar could not be produced for the ranks with less than 12 months training. The process for both men and horses was made more difficult as the government had no powers to compulsorily transfer from one regiment to another and was reliant on volunteering to replace wastage. On mobilisation the Secunderabad were ordered to make up deficiencies in personnel with volunteers from the 33rd Cavalry and in horses and saddlery from the 26th Cavalry. Units were to be accompanied by first reinforcements of 10% animals and personnel. An unforeseen problem was an outbreak of glanders in 17th Cavalry horses culminating in the 29th (Deccan Horse) Lancers being ordered (12 October) to replace them for overseas service.[121] The 34th Horse indented for 157 horses and equipment from 26th Light Cavalry (non-silladar).[122] The regiment was informed (4 September) that the Remount Department had taken over orders for remounts; British officers in possession of a suitable third charger were given permission to take them overseas. Except for British units, the WO was to provide horses and mules for artillery and engineers' wagons, horses and drivers for animal drawn supply trains for Indian forces.[123] On moving the IEFA to Europe, India supplied animals into a common pool of remounts.[124] British-Indian cavalry regiments were engaged in training raw remounts mainly intended for France. All officers' chargers landing in France were taken over by the Imperial Government at a valuation; private chargers belonging to units going home in relief, if passed as fit, and the owners wished to sell, were to be taken over immediately at valuation by the remount depot.[125]

121 BL:L/MIL/17/5/3088, Indian Expeditionary Force "A" War Diaries, Vol.III, 21 October, Appendix 97, & p.36, 12 October, Appendix 55. The 29th were ordered to mobilise on 25 August in preparation for possible service with the IEFA. B: L/MIL/17/5/3086, ibid., Vol. I, p.73, Appendix105. The 17th Cavalry (Robartes Horse, 17th Bengal Cavalry), based in Calcutta, included three of its own squadrons and one of the 27th Light Cavalry, of Punjabi Mussalmans complete with British Officers, Indian other ranks, horses and followers. The 27th remained in India during the War but squadrons served in Mesopotamia, Persia and East Africa, as well as supplying drafts to other regiments serving overseas. BL:L/MIL/17/5/3086, ibid., Vol 1, p.16, Appendix 16, p.48, Appendix 38, p.78, Appendix 65, Appendix 111; BL:L/MIL/17/5/3088, ibid., Vol.III, 11 September 1914, Appendix 72.

122 The 26th (King George's Own) Light Cavalry, ex Madras Presidency, served in South Yemen as part of the Aden Field Force, IEF(D).

123 BL:L/MIL/17/5/3088, ibid., Vol.V, 10 December 1914, Appendix 112.

124 The transport element of some Indian cavalry regiments included camels. Before the telegram was circulated that the IEFA would go to France, no decision had been taken as whether camels, or horses were to be taken. The Mhow and Meerut Brigades were informed in October that regiments would not take camels but horses. BL:L/MIL/17/5/3088, ibid., Vol.III, Appendix 121, 24 October 1914.

125 BL, L/MIL/17/5/3088, ibid., Vol.III, p.51, 15 October, Appendix 75, & 23 October 1914, Appendix 118.

A base remount depot was established in Marseilles, on an Imperial organisation, to supply all transport horses/mules and to hold 500 artillery horses, 600 British and 1,000 Indian cavalry horses and 500 mules.[126]

The WO requested remounts for the IEFA be shipped to Southampton.[127] The Indian Viceroy (Army Department) wrote to the Governor General of Australia that he proposed establishing remount agencies at Melbourne and Sidney for the purchase of mature and broken horses.[128] The WO wrote that it depended on India to replace wastage for Indian forces at 10% for cavalry, for six months. In addition the WO required India to purchase for them in Australia and New Zealand, if available, 25,000 cavalry and 25,000 artillery horses; requesting they remain in Australia during the winter months, to be trained and then shipped to England April-June. The WO was informed there were many difficulties purchasing for them, as Australian requirements were considerable and an embargo had been placed on exporting mares. After fulfilling India's own arrangements for home and France any horses over would be sent to Southampton but, the number would be small.[129] In addition to supplying 1,000 transport mules already arranged to meet 5% wastage, India was required to purchase another 1,600 horses from Argentina.[130]

Conclusion

At the end of 1915 the Indian Army Corps was withdrawn from France, including the two divisional cavalry regiments, 4th Cavalry and 15th Lancers.[131] The ICC remained in France but was broken up on 5 March 1916, with the 1st and 2nd Divisions placed under the British Third and Fourth Army's respectively.[132]

Tennant wrote that 1915 from a cavalry point of view was uneventful and in consequence somewhat depressing, as trench warfare entirely precluded all possible mounted enterprise. He lists four occasions when the Corps had been concentrated

126 BL:L/MIL/17/5/3088, ibid., Vol.III, p.37, 12 October, Appendix 59. The Base remount depot with remounts sailed 29 October in 2 ships. BL:L/MIL/17/5/3089, ibid., Vol.IV, 3 November 1914, Appendix 20.
127 BL:L/MIL/17/5/3087, ibid., Vol. II p.8, 1 September 1914, Appendix 6.
128 BL:L/MIL/17/5/3087, ibid., Vol. II, p.59, 13 September, Appendix 85. In peacetime, India purchased remounts and breeding stock from Australia.
129 BL:L/MIL/17/5/3087, ibid., Vol. II, p.107, 23 September, Appendix 136; BL:L/MIL/17/5/3088, ibid., Vol.III, p.18, 6 October 1914, Appendix 31.
130 BL:L/MIL/17/5/3087, ibid., Vol.III, p.15, 5 October, Appendix 24 – reference back to 23 September, from Viceroy (Army Department) to Secretary State, India.
131 The 4th Cavalry sailed for Egypt on 11 November with 13 British and 18 Indian officers, 12 British ranks and 451 Indian other ranks, 59 followers and 577 animals. The 15th Lancers sailed on 26 December with 11 British and 14 Indian officers, 356 other ranks, 38 followers and 403 animals.
132 Re-numbered December 1916 as 4th and 5th Cavalry Divisions. Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, p.302.

for possible action, Neuve Chapelle, Hill 60, La Bassee and Loos. The only relief to the monotony of the year was, he believed, when the Corps was twice used for trench work in the vicinity of Albert. Apart from this no fighting took place. However, he believed that on no previous occasion in its history had the Regiment been more efficient, or horses and men more fit.[133] One can only speculate on how effective mounted action might have been in the 'swamp' area in which the Corps was located in late 1914 and 1915. Anglesey holds a similar view to Tennant that during whole of 1915 cavalry was virtually never employed in action other than as infantry or pioneers. In the course of the three large scale Allied offensives Neuve Chapelle, Festubert and Loos it had to look on impotently, for nothing approaching an exploitable breakthrough was ever achieved.[134] As Kenyon has shown, in early 1915 the idea of mobile warfare and the need for an arm of exploitation was not yet dead. Taking advantage of new technology, training and organisational change the Indian Cavalry, for example, on the Somme in 1916 and campaigns of 1917, would show the value and ability of mounted troops on a modern battlefield.[135]

Saxena wrote that cavalry, though an important fighting arm, had only a supporting role. Therefore the action of cavalry, which gives lightning speed to an infantry action, cannot be studied in isolation from infantry-cavalry co-operation.[136] Warfare on the Western Front during late 1914 and 1915 was not one for traditional cavalry, or lighting speed. Cavalry regiments of the British-Indian army fought dismounted in the trenches, providing a valuable, at times critical, mobile reserve, but remained the only mobile force for exploitation should the planned for breakthroughs arise. However, Saxena's words remain relevant. The part played by the two regiments of Indian divisional cavalry and the ICC cannot be seen in isolation from the support required from them by infantry operations, set against the context of developing trench warfare and need for a mobile reserve. Often hidden under the umbrella of the Indian Army Corps, British-Indian Army cavalry regiments including their RFA batteries, machine gun sections and support units, deserve greater acknowledgement for their role in the defensive victories of 1914-15. The cavalry demonstrated they were equal to their infantry colleagues in shooting and fighting and throughout this period they remained the one arm that could supply, if and when needed, the lightning speed for exploitation.

133 Tennant, *Royal Deccan Horse*, p.42 (20th Deccan Horse).
134 Anglesey, *History British Cavalry*, pp.19-20.
135 Kenyon, *Horsemen in No Man's Land*, p.38; Morton-Jack, *Indian Army*, p.249.
136 Shyham Saxena, *Role of India in the First World War*, (Delhi: Bhavtia Parkasham, 1987).

Chapter 6 Appendix I

Indian Army Corps order of Battle 1914

3rd (Lahore) Division:

7th Ferozepore Brigade
1st Bn. Connaught Rangers
9th Bhopal Infantry
57th Wilde's Rifles (Frontier Force)
129th Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchis

8th Jullundur Brigade
1st Bn. Manchester Regiment
15th Ludhiana Sikhs
47th Sikhs
59th Scinde Rifles (Frontier Force)

9th Sirhind Brigade
(arrived Marseilles from Egypt 30 November, joined 9 December 1914).
1st Bn. Highland Light Infantry
125th Napier's Rifles
1/1st Gurkha Rifles
1/4th Gurkha Rifles

7th (Meerut) Division:

19th Dehra Dun Brigade
1st Bn. Seaforth Highlanders
6th Jat Light Infantry
2/2nd King Edward's Own Gurkha Rifles (Sirmoor Regiment)
1/9th Gurkha Rifles

20th Garhwal Brigade
2nd Bn. Leicestershire Regiment
1/39th Garhwal Rifles
2/39th Garhwal Rifles
2/3rd Gurkha Rifles

21st Bareilly Brigade
2nd Bn. Black Watch
41st Dogras
58th Vaughan's Rifles (Frontier Force)
2/8th Gurkha Rifles

Chapter 6 Appendix II

Indian Cavalry Corps order of Battle October-December 1914[1]

Indian Cavalry Corps: (formed 18 December 1914)
Commander: Lieutenant-General Michael Rimington (British Army)
HQ Command
Corps Troops
- Jodhpur Lancers (went to France with the 9th (Secunderabad) Brigade)
- 1st Indian Signal Squadron
- Jodhpur Cavalry Field Ambulance

1st Indian Cavalry Division: (arrived France 7 November 1914)
Maj-Gen Hew Fenshawe (British Army)
- Ambala Cavalry Brigade
- Lucknow Cavalry Brigade
- Sialkot Cavalry Brigade
- Divisional Troops

3rd (Ambala) Brigade[2] Maj-Gen C P W Pirie (Indian Army)
- 8th (King's Royal Irish) Hussars (British)
- 9th Hodson's Horse
- 30th Lancers (Gordon's Horse)

1 In 1911 Indian regiments were renumbered. Regular cavalry of the line received a new numbering system, from 1-39 (but with no number 24 of the old 4th Punjab Cavalry, Frontier Force) keeping where possible identifying titles, for example 2nd Bengal Lancers becoming 2nd Lancers (Gardner's Horse). In addition to these regiments there were the independent squadron of the Guides Cavalry (raised 1847 as Lumsden's, renamed 1911 Queen Victoria's Own Corps of Guides (Frontier Force) (Lumsden's Cavalry); the Aden Troop (created 1855 to police the Aden Protectorate) and three Bodyguard Corps. MacMunn, *The Armies of India*, p.176.

2 Transferred 15 September 1915 to the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division.

- Signal Troop, Royal Engineers
- "A" Battery, Royal Horse Artillery (RHA)[3]

8th (Lucknow) Brigade Maj-Gen George Arthur Cookson, then Brig-Gen W.H. Faskin (Indian Army) from 9 December 1914
- 1st (King's) Dragoon Guards (British)
- 29th Lancers (Deccan Horse)
- 36th Jacob's Horse
- Signal Troop, Royal Engineers
- "U" Battery, RHA

2nd (Sialkot) Brigade Brig-Gen Henry Peregrine Leader (British Army)
- 17th (Duke of Cambridge's Own) Lancers (British)
- 6th (King Edward's Own) Cavalry
- 19th Lancers (Fane's Horse)
- Signal Troop, Royal Engineers
- "Q" Battery, RHA

1st Indian Cavalry Division Troops
- 1st Indian Brigade, RHA[4] (formed France, 12 December 1914)
- 1st Indian RHA Brigade Ammunition Column sections "B", "C", "G"
- 2nd Indian Field Troop Royal Engineers
- 2nd Indian Signal Squadron
- 1st Indian Supply Column

2nd Indian Cavalry Division: (arrived France 14 December 1914)
Maj-Gen, G.A. Cookson (Indian Army)
- Meerut Cavalry Brigade
- Mhow Cavalry Brigade
- Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade
- Divisional Troops

7th (Meerut) Brigade Brig-Gen Fitz-James Edwards (Indian Army)
- 13th Hussars
- 3rd Skinner's Horse
- 18th (King George's Own) Lancers

3 "A" battery (Chestnut Troop), based in Ambala, India at the outbreak of war and with the Ambala Brigade until transferred September 1915 to 5th (Mhow) Brigade, 2nd Indian Cavalry Division.

4 RHA batteries, each with six 13 pounder field guns, were allocated to each cavalry brigade.

- Signal Troop, Royal Engineers
- "V" Battery RHA

5th (Mhow) Brigade[5] Col. M E Willoughby (temp)
- 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons (British)
- 2nd Lancers (Gardner's Horse)
- 38th (King George's Own) Central India Horse
- Signal Troop, Royal Engineers
- "X" Battery RHA[6]

9th (Secunderabad) Brigade (from 12 December 1914)
Brig-Gen Frederick William George Wadeson (Indian Army)
- 7th (Princess Royal's) Dragoon Guards (British)
- 20th Deccan Horse
- 34th (Prince Albert Victor's Own) Poona Horse
- Signal Troop, Royal Engineers
- "N" Battery RHA

2nd Indian Cavalry Divisional Troops[7]
- II Indian Brigade, Royal Horse Artillery (formed France, December 1914)
- II Brigade Ammunition Column, "H" section ("E" and "F" sections arriving from England, 5 January 1915)
- 1st Indian Field Troop, Royal Engineers
- 3rd Indian Signal Squadron
- 2nd Indian Cavalry Supply Column

5 Transferred 15 September 1915 to 1st Indian Cavalry Division.
6 "X" Battery, RHA transferred from 1st Division to Ambala Cavalry Brigade, September 1915.
7 Brigades had their own service units although these were sometimes at Divisional disposal for example: Lucknow Brigade Mobile Veterinary Section and Ambala, Lucknow and Sialkot Field Ambulances (medical units).

7

Douglas Haig and the Planning of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle

Patrick Watt

As the first large-scale planned British offensive of the First World War, the Battle of Neuve Chapelle occupies an important place in the war experience of the British Expeditionary Force. However, the battle, fought between 10 and 12 March 1915, has often been overlooked in favour of studies of the larger actions of later in the war. Indeed, as one historian has noted, biographers "have generally been content to view 1915 through the lens of Haig as Commander-in-Chief", resulting in his command of First Army escaping historical study.[1] This chapter will aim to redress the balance somewhat by examining Sir Douglas Haig's role in the planning and execution of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle.

On 30 December 1914, four days after assuming command of the newly created First Army, General Sir Douglas Haig attended a conference of his corps commanders, Lieutenant-General Charles Monro (I Corps), Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Rawlinson (IV Corps), and Lieutenant-General Sir James Willcocks (Indian Corps), to discuss proposals for future offensive operations. Haig believed that "while waiting for more troops to arrive we should follow a policy of quiet determination, and push on our saps steadily each night with a definite object in view".[2] While Rawlinson

1 Nick Lloyd, 'With Faith and Without Fear': Sir Douglas Haig's Command of First Army in 1915', *Journal of Military History* 71, No. 4 (October 2007), 1052. Since Lloyd wrote this comment in 2007, several biographers have attempted to examine Haig's performance in 1915 in more detail. Notable works included J.P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Gary Sheffield, *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army* (London: Aurum, 2011).

2 National Library of Scotland, Papers of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, 1st Earl Haig, [hereafter NLS, Haig Papers], Acc.3155 No.100, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 30 December 1914. There are two copies of Haig's diaries held in the NLS, the typescript diary with maps, photographs and other illustrative material, and a handwritten diary written up shortly after the war. For the purposes of this chapter I am consistent in using the typed version of Haig's diaries.

favoured digging forward from Fromelles, Haig asked "whether he could not drive the enemy out of Neuve Chapelle. He said NO".[3] While Rawlinson's opinion prevailed on this occasion due to the waterlogged state of the ground, the conversation shows that as early as December 1914 Haig was considering the capture of the village.

Rawlinson, however, seems to have given more consideration to Haig's ideas. On 20 January 1915, Rawlinson issued a draft operational order entitled 'The Attack of Neuve Chapelle' which invited schemes from his divisional commanders for a proposed attack to be delivered five days later.[4] The 8th Division response seems to have been drafted by a staff officer, Major G. V. Horden, who responded with a series of draft operational instructions to the CRA and CRE of the 8th Division and a document entitled 'Memorandum on the Attack of Neuve Chapelle' in which he presented the opinion that "Neuve Chapelle must be regarded as a fortress and be attacked as such".[5] Horden further suggested that "to attack the line by a general advance in force along the whole front had been proved by previous experiences to be a method to be avoided if possible" and he recommended isolating the village from the rest of the German line by converging attacks from the north and south.[6] The German attack on the British I Corps at Cuinchy on 25 January meant that Horden's plans were temporarily shelved.

Haig made no further reference to Neuve Chapelle until 2 February when, during a meeting with Major-General John Du Cane, Sir John French's artillery advisor at GHQ, he announced that his "plan was to capture Neuve Chapelle and 'the Triangle' and then, as soon as sufficient troops became available to work on in conjunction with the French and capture La Bassee".[7] Three days later, Haig met with the commanders-in-chief of the British and French armies, Sir John French and General Joseph Joffre, where the latter shared his plans to attack at Arras and in Champagne once the weather improved. From the British, Joffre wanted an extension of their line northwards, to relieve the French IX Corps near Ypres who would then march south and join in the offensive of General Maud'huy's Tenth Army.[8]

Immediately after the meeting with French and Joffre, Haig met with the new GHQ Chief of Staff, Sir William Robertson. Haig seemed particularly impressed, noting that "in talking to him, one gets a feeling of confidence that he will be thorough and practical in whatever plans he takes in hand".[9] Robertson was quick to outline those plans. In what Harris and Marble called "a deceptively simple, but rather brilliant memorandum" dated 8 February, Robertson described that the fighting on the Western Front had now reached a point at which "the principles of fortress warfare

3 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 30 December 1914, [Haig's Emphasis].
4 The National Archives [hereafter TNA], WO 95/707, 'The Attack on Neuve Chapelle'.
5 TNA: WO95/707, 'Memorandum on the Attack of Neuve Chapelle'.
6 TNA: WO95/707, 'Memorandum on the Attack of Neuve Chapelle'.
7 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 2 February 1915.
8 J.P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11-12.
9 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 5 February 1915.

rather than those of field warfare apply".[10] With that being the case, the Germans could only be beaten "by a process of slow attrition, by a slow and gradual advance on our part, each step being prepared by predominant artillery fire and a great expenditure of ammunition".[11] Robertson instructed Haig and Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, the commander of the Second Army, to investigate the possibilities of an attack in their respective sectors, from a position "where we are already at a tactical advantage", further suggesting that particular attention be paid to the Violaines plateau and La Bassee in the south and the re-entrant of the Messines and Wytschaete Ridge in the Second Army area to the north.[12]

Sir Douglas Haig, commanding First Army. (Editor's collection)

Haig, however, had already been investigating the possibilities of an attack in his sector but meeting with Robertson on 5 February seemed to galvanise him into more definite action. On returning from the Robertson meeting, Haig spoke with Major-General Mercer, the CRA of First Army and ordered him to "submit proposals for disposing our artillery for attacking Neuve Chapelle".[13] The following day, Haig visited the headquarters of Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Rawlinson and ordered him to prepare proposals to capture the village, something which Haig hoped would be ready with only ten days preparation.[14] Rawlinson devolved responsibility to his two divisional commanders, Major-General Francis Davies of the 8th Division and Major-General Sir Thompson Capper of the 7th Division.[15]

10 Paul Harris and Sanders Marble, 'The "Step by Step" Approach: British Military Thought and Operational Method on the Western Front, 1915-1917', *War in History* 15, No.1, (January 2008), 20; TNA: WO158/17, 'Memorandum on the Possibility of Undertaking Offensive Operations'.

11 TNA: WO158/17, 'Memorandum on the Possibility of Undertaking Offensive Operations'.

12 TNA: WO158/17, 'Memorandum on the Possibility of Undertaking Offensive Operations'.

13 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 5 February 1915.

14 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 6 February 1915.

15 For an examination of Capper's performance in 1914 see Richard Olsen, 'An Inspirational Warrior: Major-General Sir Thompson Capper', in Spencer Jones (ed.), *Stemming the Tide:*

The historiography of the planning of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle has not been kind to Sir Thompson Capper, yet his role in the wider discussions of the battle is of particular importance. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, whose book *Command on the Western Front* is one of the most influential works on the battle, noted that while Davies responded to Rawlinson's request for operational plans on 7 February, "Capper did not (as far as can be discovered) ever respond".[16] In actual fact he did respond, and with a paper of considerable insight, copies of which can be found in both the war diary of the 7th Division General Staff and in the IV Corps report on the Battle of Neuve Chapelle.[17] Capper gave the opinion that there were two methods through which an advance could be made from his position: either a bombardment and storm operation or a gradual approach by sap.[18] With regards to the first option, Capper offered the suggestion of what became known as a "bite and hold" operation. Capper wrote:

> The point of attack would therefore be chosen for reasons of:- (i) best artillery support; (ii) facilities for forming up assaulting columns; (iii) least difficulties in ground actually to be crossed; (iv) prospect of being able to construct, with sufficient rapidity, communications from enemy's trenches (after capture) to our own.
>
> The result of an attack by this method, if successful, would be a 'bite' out of the enemy's entrenched line. This 'bite' could be enlarged by fresh attacks until a hole was made through which a sufficiently large operating force could be poured. Failing these subsequent operations, the 'bite' would merely become a salient which might be troublesome to retain.[19]

This concept of "bite and hold" was attributed by Prior and Wilson to Sir Henry Rawlinson, who wrote on 25 March to Colonel Clive Wigram, the Aide-de-Camp of the King, that "what we want to do now is what I call 'bite and hold'. Bite off a piece of the enemy's line, like Neuve Chapelle, and hold it against counter-attack".[20] This, then, is the main difference between Rawlinson's and Capper's ideas of the bombard and storm operation. While Rawlinson advocated taking a bite and holding it against the inevitable German counter-attack "and inflicting on him at least twice

Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force, 1914 (Solihull: Helion & Co., 2013), 189-210.

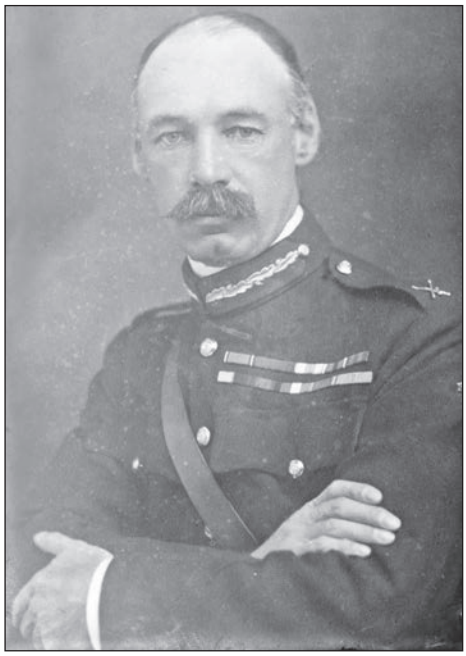
16 Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson, 1914-1918,* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military Classics, 2004), 25.

17 TNA: WO95/1628/1, 'Capper to Rawlinson, 8 February 1915'; TNA: WO158/374/11, 'Neuve Chapelle: Report by GOC VII Division'. The original version of this paper, handwritten by Capper, is the one contained in the Seventh Division General Staff War Diary and is the version used in this chapter.

18 TNA: WO95/1628/1, 'Capper to Rawlinson, 8 February 1915'.

19 TNA: WO95/1628/1, 'Capper to Rawlinson, 8 February 1915'.

20 Rawlinson to Wigram, 25 March 1915, quoted in Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front,* 78.



Sir Henry Rawlinson, commanding IV Corps. (Editor's collection)

the loss that we have suffered during the bite", Capper's "intense belief in the offensive" demanded that once the bite be taken it should be systematically enlarged by further attacks, enabling the advance of significant numbers of troops and achieving the decisive success as laid out in the *Field Service Regulations 1909*.[21] In the past twenty years Rawlinson has gained the credit as being the founder of the "bite and hold" method of attack.[22] With regards to the 'hold' the praise is deserved, but the 'bite' was the idea of Major-General Sir Thompson Capper.

Capper's and Davies' proposals were passed to Rawlinson on 8 February and then to Haig two days later. On 12 February Haig presented three possibilities for offensive operations to GHQ. The one he favoured, was a "bombard and storm" operation which would initially capture Neuve Chapelle village and then enlarge the gap by taking Bois du Biez, Aubers Village and Ridge, and if possible Fromelles with the objective of a line from Illies to Herlies.[23] It was a bold strategy which was intended to be made in conjunction with the French attack to the south. It was also a departure from the line-straightening operation Haig had first mentioned to Rawlinson on 6 February. As Haig stressed to GHQ, "the advance to be made is not a minor operation. It is to be understood that we are embarking on a serious offensive movement with the object of breaking the German line, and consequently our advance is to be pushed vigourously. Very likely an operation of considerable magnitude may result"[24]

Simultaneous to Haig's planning at Neuve Chapelle, General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, the commander of Second Army, was doing likewise at Ypres. In front of

21 Rawlinson to Wigram, 25 March 1915, quoted in Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front,* 78; Keith R. Simpson, 'Capper and the Offensive Spirit', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* 118, No.2 (1973), 51; *Field Service Regulations 1909,* (London: War Office, 1909), section 99.1.

22 Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front,* 78; Harris and Marble, 'The "Step by Step" Approach' 21.

23 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 12 February 1915.

24 TNA: WO95/154, 'Haig to GHQ', 12 February 1915.

Smith-Dorrien's position lay the tactically important Wytschaete-Messines Ridge, the capture of which appeared more significant than Haig's proposals. In the end, the decision on where to attack rested with Sir John French, who appears to have based it on two crucial factors, one military and one personal. Sir William Robertson intimated to Haig on 12 February that General Foch, commanding the French forces, agreed with Haig that an advance in support of the French attack was preferable to any co-operation around Ypres which would invariably bring the BEF "up against a strong position on the Lys, and then the forts of Lille".[25] The second reason for the choice of Haig's plan was because Sir John French "could never be certain of getting satisfactory results from Smith-Dorrien and … because [Haig's] troops were better".[26] The need to acquiesce to the wishes of the French coupled with a personal distaste for Smith-Dorrien pushed Sir John French into committing First Army to the attack.

Safe in the knowledge that First Army was to be used in the first British offensive of 1915, Haig set about expanding his plans. He wrote to Rawlinson on 13 February returning IV Corps' initial plans. While Haig acknowledged that they "show signs of careful thought and will no doubt be helpful to you in working out the details of a practical plan" he also stressed the need to "begin at once to go thoroughly into every detail, because success depends on methodical preparation".[27] Those preparations were further elaborated by Haig at a conference of corps commanders at Merville on 15 February. Haig told his three corps commanders that each would be involved in the upcoming battle. Monro's I Corps would be required to capture the orchard near La Quinque Rue; Willcocks' Indian Corps would take the southern end of the village of Neuve Chapelle and press on to the Bois du Biez; Rawlinson's IV Corps would capture the rest of the Neuve Chapelle and then advance on Aubers village.[28] Haig provided his corps commanders with a ten point list to consider over the next five days before drawing up their secondary draft plans. The points Haig listed are as follows:

1. Arrangements for bringing up the attacking troops on position of readiness near front line.
2. How to get over our own wire obstacles. All wire should now be put down with this object in view.
3. Study ground. Officers on the spot should correct maps daily; the enemy's wire to be marked on map etc.
4. Guns to practice destroying enemy wire.
5. Guns should be gradually and secretly placed in positions to suit the scheme of attack. Targets to be registered gradually so as not to attract attention.

25 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 12 February 1915.
26 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 13 February 1915.
27 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', Haig to Rawlinson, 13 February 1915, [Haig's emphasis].
28 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 15 February 1915.

6. Most important Officers should observe the enemy's line daily most closely. We want to locate his Maxims!
7. Mountain Artillery and Machine guns should follow the assaulting parties so as to get into action quickly in new position.
8. Mines. What can we do to defeat enemy's mines?
9. Make saps with the object of supporting the attack.
10. Can we bring trench mortars into position secretly so that a large number of them can be massed against points which we mean to take?[29]

Sir Henry Rawlinson responded by passing the planning back to his divisional commanders, Capper and Davies. On 17 February Rawlinson passed Major Horden's 'Memorandum on the Attack of Neuve Chapelle' of late January back to Davies.[30] While Davies' assertion that Neuve Chapelle should be dealt with as a fortress chimed with Robertson's overall appraisal of the fighting on the Western Front, Rawlinson remarked that he "doubt[ed] if it is correct to flatter Neuve Chapelle by calling it a fortress".[31] Rawlinson suggested that the state of the ground coupled with "conditions elsewhere" meant that a "bombard and storm" operation would be preferable to a "sapping and mining" attack as suggested by Davies.[32] Despite his comment that Neuve Chapelle was not a fortress, Rawlinson then touched upon one of the key theories of operational planning during the First World War. He noted that "an undertaking such as that which is under consideration depends for its success almost entirely upon the correct and efficient employment of the artillery. It is primarily an artillery operation and if the artillery cannot crush and demoralise the enemy's infantry by their fire effect, the enterprise will not succeed".[33] What is clear at this stage in the planning process is Haig's preference for Rawlinson and his staff to take the lead in operation planning. While this could be seen as having trust in his subordinate it has been suggested that the decision to delegate to Rawlinson "was, at least in part, a manoeuvre in the internal politics of the army", in a similar vein to Sir John French's selection of Haig as the chief battle planner ahead of Smith-Dorrien.[34] Harris further suggests that Haig may have been somewhat "sanguine about mounting a frontal assault on a well-trained, well-disciplined enemy in a fortified position" and placed

29 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 15 February 1915.
30 Prior and Wilson have suggested that this document was created by Davies in response to Rawlinson's request in mid-February however as this chapter has shown it was originally a planning document from 23 January (Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front,* 25).
31 TNA: WO95/707, 'Remarks on VIII Division Scheme'.
32 TNA: WO95/707, 'Remarks on VIII Division Scheme'.
33 TNA: WO95/707, 'Remarks on VIII Division Scheme'; Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front,* 25.
34 Harris, *Haig and the First World War*, 114.

"an insulating layer, represented by a subordinate level of command, between himself and the detailed planning of such a battle".[35]

On 18 February, Rawlinson sent two papers to First Army headquarters, 'Notes on the Attack of Neuve Chapelle' and 'Points for Consideration in the attack on Neuve Chapelle'.[36] These documents did little to advance the specifics of planning the battle because, according to Rawlinson, it was "scarcely necessary at this early stage to enter into details".[37] The second document was a continuation of ideas first expressed ten days previous, in which Rawlinson advocated a two-day operation to capture the village. While some of his suggestions such as grouping all artillery under the command of one individual and the primacy of artillery in the operation were prescient, others including giving ten days to a fortnight's rest for attacking troops prior to the day of battle were simply not possible given the state of the BEF at the time.[38]

Haig was not impressed with Rawlinson's vague plans. He responded on 19 February asking Rawlinson to "put forward a scheme for this particular operation … please get to work on it at once".[39] While Haig acknowledged that Rawlinson's papers "deal with the general principles on which an attack on any defended locality protected by trenches and obstacles should be conducted" there is no disguising the tone of his letter.[40] He followed the rebuke with a further list of specific points to be considered regarding the number and position of artillery, their proposed targets, and the arrangements to be made for the preparation and composition of the infantry attack.[41] Rawlinson, perhaps sensing the tone, immediately responded to Haig saying that "of course I have thought over all these matters but have not discussed them with any of my subordinates" and rather belatedly added that the "scheme will of course not be complete but I will put on paper for you as much as the limited time available will permit".[42] In return, Haig admonished Rawlinson that "it is impossible for a Corps [commander] to make detailed plans for an operation which Brigadiers will have to carry out" and "it is an absolute necessity to take some of your subordinates into your confidence".[43] Rawlinson's third draft proposals were to be passed to Haig for discussion at a conference on 22 February.

In the meantime, Rawlinson again delegated to Francis Davies and Thompson Capper. Davies responded quickly, indicating that he had been considering a detailed

35 Harris, *Haig and the First World War*, 114.
36 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 18 February 1915.
37 TNA: WO158/258, 'Notes on the Attack of Neuve Chapelle'.
38 TNA: WO158/258, 'Points for Consideration in the Attack on Neuve Chapelle'.
39 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', Haig to Rawlinson, 19 February 1915.
40 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', Haig to Rawlinson, 19 February 1915.
41 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', Haig to Rawlinson, 19 February 1915.
42 TNA: WO95/707, 'Rawlinson to Haig', 19 February 1915.
43 TNA: WO95/707, 'Haig to Rawlinson', 19 February 1915 [Haig's emphasis].

Sir Thompson Capper, commanding 7th Division. (Editor's collection)

plan prior to being asked by Rawlinson. His report, 'Notes on the Attack' recommended a complicated two brigade attack to the north of the village to be accompanied by a similar attack by the Indian Corps to the south. After a pause to regroup, the village would be taken the following day.[44] This report and an additional one by Brigadier-General Holland, the CRA of the 8th Division (with some points on which Davies disagreed) were forwarded to Haig on 21 February with a covering note written by Rawlinson. In it he acknowledged that Davies' most recent plan was "somewhat complicated" and suggested that "the actual details must be left largely in the hands of the Brigadiers who are selected to command the respective columns".[45] While Rawlinson seemed to be devolving operation planning to an even lower level of subordinates he also seemed to be fairly reluctant to commit himself to a definitive course of action.[46] Even as late as 21 February Rawlinson was content to forward Davies' plan and another by Capper (which has not been found) instead of producing a settled, considered plan in conjunction with the staff of IV Corps. Perhaps even more crucially, Rawlinson failed to take into consideration the wider methods required to

44 TNA: WO95/1671, 'Notes on the Attack', 20 February 1915.
45 TNA: WO158/374/5, 'The Attack of Neuve Chapelle', 21 February 1915.
46 Harris, *Haig and the First World War,* 115.

secure the secondary objectives of the Aubers Ridge which Haig had explained to his corps commanders at the Merville conference of 15 February.[47]

This latest proposal was discussed at a conference in Merville on 22 February. It was one of the most difficult days of the war thus far for Haig. Two days previous, Brigadier-General 'Johnnie' Gough, Haig's chief of staff had been dangerously wounded when visiting his old battalion in the front line trenches. At 6am on 22 February Haig received a telegram informing him of Gough's death.[48] "For us at Army HQ, it is like losing one of our own family", wrote Haig's intelligence officer, John Charteris.[49] "D.H. [Haig] is badly upset, although he shows it little", he continued.[50] Four hours after hearing of Gough's death, Haig attended the conference at Merville alongside his new chief of staff, Brigadier-General Richard Butler, his CRA, Major-General Mercer, and the commanding officers and chiefs of staff of I, IV and the Indian Corps.[51] Haig disagreed with Rawlinson's and Davies' ideas of a two-day attack, highlighting the difficulty of bombarding the village when British troops were so close, and the absence of the element of surprise on the second day.[52] After lunch, Haig attended Gough's funeral. The planning process was, once again, handed back to Rawlinson.

What was needed now was decisive leadership from Haig. Rawlinson and his divisional commanders had produced three separate plans of attack all of which were rejected by First Army. As the proposed operation now involved not only an attack by IV Corps on Neuve Chapelle, but a further attack by the Indian Corps to the immediate south of the village, the planning should have taken place at First Army headquarters.[53] Yet First Army did not take control.

At noon on 23 February Haig arrived at IV Corps headquarters to ask Rawlinson what steps he had taken in the previous twenty-four hours. Finding Rawlinson in bed with a cold, Haig met with his chief of staff, Brigadier-General Dallas who informed Haig that Major-General Capper had been called in to assist Davies with the planning. Haig was not impressed as is revealed by his diary entry of 23 February:

> I said that the time for setting schemes had passed. It was now for the Corps Commander to order a certain Divisional General to give in detail his plan of attack. In my opinion it was necessary to give full responsibility for the plan to whomever would have the task of attacking the position on the 10th March [provisional day of attack]. If any commander did not do what was required, he

47 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 15 February 1915; Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front,* 26.
48 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 22 February 1915.
49 John Charteris, *At GHQ* (London, 1931), 77.
50 Charteris, *At GHQ,* 77.
51 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 22 February 1915.
52 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 22 February 1915.
53 Harris, *Haig and the First World War,* 116.

> would be dismissed. If each problem is to be given to two Commanders where are we to stop? Why not give the Brigadiers schemes to two Brigadiers and so on. The idea is ridiculous.[54]

Brigadier-General Dallas then, was the recipient of all Haig's wrath. One wonders, given his performance in planning in the preceding two weeks, whether the commander who ran the risk of being dismissed was Rawlinson himself. Yet while Haig's criticism of Rawlinson's plans are based on solid tactical foundations, those directed at Rawlinson's decision to delegate planning are somewhat hypocritical, as Haig was doing just that by asking Rawlinson to plan the offensive.[55]

Whatever the basis for Haig's anger, his comments had the desired effect. Davies set about producing a further plan (his fourth) which was much simpler than previous iterations. Gone was the complicated, two-day endeavour and in its place was a "direct frontal attack on the village" to be made in one day by the IV and Indian Corps.[56] This approach met with the approval of Haig, who noted that the "operation was now to be carried out as I wished in a simple common sense way … this plan was much better than [Rawlinson's] first complicated proposals".[57] This plan was to form the basis for the actual assault of Neuve Chapelle on 10 March yet despite its simplicity it gave no consideration to an advance beyond the village nor any co-ordination with the French attack to the south.[58] Simultaneous to the IV Corps planning operation, the Indian Corps were also making preparations for the attack on the southern flank of Neuve Chapelle and the Bois du Biez. Brigadier-General Hudson, the chief of staff to Lieutenant-General Sir James Willcocks, GOC of the Indian Corps had, like Davies, produced a plan to capture the village in two distinct stages. While Haig advised against this, he did consider that "in other respects I thought their scheme was well worked out and most of the possible difficulties had been forseen and provided against".[59]

In the event, the French attack was not destined to happen. Joffre had decided that an attack on Vimy Ridge near Arras was not in his best interests at the time and chose to make his part in the operation conditional on the BEF relieving the French IX Corps at Ypres.[60] Sir John French did not deem the relief practical and the French support, save for providing some artillery cover to the southern flank, was withdrawn. The plan proposed by Haig on the condition of French assistance was now to be undertaken solely by the BEF. This was the first of two blows to hit First Army HQ on 28 February. The second was the receipt of a memorandum from GHQ informing Haig

54 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 23 February 1915.
55 Harris, *Haig and the First World War,* 116-17.
56 TNA: WO158/374/10, 'Notes on the Attack of Neuve Chapelle', 23 February 1915.
57 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 25 February 1915.
58 Harris, *Haig and the First World War,* 117.
59 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 3 March 1915.
60 Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, 30.

that "the shell supply was severely limited and that he must be careful not to excessively deplete the BEF's reserves".[61] As Haig himself then wrote "it is clear that the scope of our operations is limited, i.e., that, even if successful at first, a point will be reached in a very short time, i.e. in two or three days at most, when we will have to re-establish our line".[62]

Sir Francis 'Joey' Davies, commanding 8th Division. (Editor's collection)

It is perhaps surprising, given the mounting obstacles that the attack was ordered to continue. Yet continue it did. Davies, informed on 25 February that his 8th Division would lead the IV Corps attack, produced yet another plan of attack, in this case a comprehensive point by point analysis which included specific objectives for the assaulting battalions.[63] Now that a realistic plan was in place, the senior officers turned to working out the specifics of the artillery preparations. Certainly, Haig was proactive in this endeavour and had met with Major-General Freddy Mercer, the CRA of First Army on 5 February, the day before asking Rawlinson to prepare proposals for the IV Corps attack. When Mercer returned to First Army headquarters five days later, "he proposed bombarding [Neuve Chapelle] 'by compartments' and to take 4 days over it. In my opinion such a slow action would lose much of the effect of the heavy shells. It would, I think, be more effective to compress the fire into a terrible outburst for 3 hours, that is to say fire the same number of shells in three hours as [Mercer] proposes to fire in 4 days and … follow it by a sudden rush of our infantry".[64] This opinion was echoed, and may have been suggested, by Haig's first chief of staff, Sir John Gough, who wrote that "perhaps our best method to surprise

61 Harris, *Haig and the First World War,* 117.
62 TNA: WO158/181, 'Confidential Memorandum by GOC First Army', 28 February 1915.
63 TNA: WO158/258, 'Report on the Further Progress in considering the Capture of Neuve Chapelle'.
64 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 10 February 1915.

the enemy is to attack suddenly, i.e. the first sign of attack will be the sudden opening of our artillery bombardment".[65]

Rawlinson also seems to have disagreed with Mercer's assessment. In responding to Davies' draft plan on 17 February, Rawlinson recognised the need for the "predominance of artillery" but gave the opinion that Haig's "terrible outburst" should be as short as thirty minutes long before revising his opinion on 28 February.[66] That revision suggested that the artillery bombardment should commence at 7am from when "bursts of fire are delivered increasingly gradually in intensity until [between] 8.20 and 8.30 the maximum is reached and maintained" before lifting on to a further set of targets to eliminate German reinforcements reaching the front line.[67] One of the key facets of the artillery operation was the successful cutting of the German wire to allow British troops to take the trenches. Throughout February, experiments in wire cutting were carried out along First Army's front. In one example, that of 20 February, six guns from a 12-pounder battery fired 138 rounds of time shrapnel over fifteen minutes on a front of 100 yards. The target was three or four rows of barbed wire on stakes three feet off the ground. The result was one gap five yards wide, one gap three yards wide and one gap incomplete. According to Haig, this result was "very successful".[68] By 3 March, Mercer, after conferring with numerous CRAs and battery commanders, advised Haig that "a bombardment of about 35 minutes should suffice", Haig noting that "there is a considerable difference between the 2 1/2 hours bombardment first recommended by 4th Corps, and the present proposal of 35 minutes", not to mention Mercer's initial assessment of a four day bombardment by compartment.[69]

On 28 February Haig met with Rawlinson and Brigadier-General Holland, the CRA of the 8th Division. The meeting seems to have created more problems than it solved, Haig commenting in his diary that "none of the artillery commanders seem able to agree as to the amounts of ammunition or time required to destroy a given length of hostile position as now constructed".[70] Haig decided that the best course of action was to visit GHQ the following day and see Robertson, the CGS on the subject. In the meantime Brigadier-Generals Mercer and Holland were to work together to decide on the positioning of the British artillery batteries.[71] While Robertson "was most helpful and promised [Haig] everything extra [that] we wanted", Haig's next movements suggest that he was particularly unsure about the correct employment of the artillery in the forthcoming operation. After leaving GHQ, Haig met with Major-General Horne, the commanding officer of the 2nd Division "about the effect

65 TNA: WO158/258/3, 'Notes by Br. Gen. Gough re details of proposed operations', undated [Gough's emphasis].
66 Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, 30.
67 TNA: WO95/708, Rawlinson to Haig, 28 February 1915.
68 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 24 February 1915.
69 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 3 March 1915.
70 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 28 February 1915.
71 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 28 February 1915.

of guns and siege howitzers in battering trenches", before continuing on to meet with Brigadier-General Fanshawe, the CRA of the 1st Division, about the use of howitzers.[72] What is clear is that instead of continuing to discuss artillery matters with the commanding officers of the IV Corps, 7th and 8th Divisions and their CRAs, Haig chose to seek the opinions of artillerymen who were not to be directly involved in the Neuve Chapelle operation. Indeed, the response of Horne to Haig's questioning unveiled the crux of artillery planning operations in March 1915. He noted "that very little practical experience had been gained" in the correct use of artillery in the conditions specific to the Western Front.[73] However, from this Haig chose to send Mercer to "see the battery commanders of the 6 inch howitzers in the 2nd Division. They have the latest and most practical experiences of any and will be able to give an opinion as to the extent of front which the Divisional Artillery can effectively batter".[74]

By the first days of March, the difficulties in planning such an operation were becoming painfully clear. Not only were Haig's artillery advisors unable to agree on some of the more basic principles of how to bombard an entrenched position, but the far reaching objectives set out by Haig to GHQ on 13 February now seemed destined to be shelved due to the lack of support from the French and a shortage of ammunition. However, despite Haig's assertion in the confidential memorandum of 28 February that the "scope of the operation was [now] limited" he "somehow resisted the logic of his own argument".[75] At a meeting with Rawlinson about the modified IV Corps plan of 28 February, Haig reiterated his desire for far-reaching objectives. He informed Rawlinson that:

> our objective was not merely the capture of Neuve Chapelle. Our line was just as satisfactory for us as if we were in Neuve Chapelle! I aimed at getting to the line Illies-Herlies and the line of the La Bassee road to Lille and thus, if possible break the enemy's front. It seemed to me to be desirable to make our plans on the chance of surprising the enemy and with the definite objective of advancing rapidly (and without any check) in the hope of starting a general advance.[76]

Harris in particular had been scathing of this change in direction noting that "it raises questions about [Haig's] capacity to apply sustained consistent logic to the problems of Army Command".[77] Based on the available evidence it is difficult to disagree with Harris' opinion. In committing to an attack on a large scale, Haig was seeking to fight 'the decisive battle', the principles of which he had learned at the Staff College

72 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 1 March 1915.
73 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 1 March 1915.
74 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 1 March 1915.
75 TNA: WO158/181, 'Confidential Memorandum by GOC First Army', 28 February 1915; Harris, *Haig and the First World War,* 117.
76 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 2 March 1915.
77 Harris, *Haig and the First World War,* 118.

at Camberley in 1896-7.[78] In short, the decisive battle consisted of a significant breakthrough of the enemy's line which could be exploited by ones reserves and relied heavily on the "need for discipline, high morale and 'pluck' on the battlefield".[79] The final aim of this strategy was to break the deadlock of trench warfare, return to a more traditional war of movement, and potentially bring about the end of the war.

These views, however, differed from those of his subordinates. Indeed, Rawlinson preferred Thompson Capper's "bite and hold" strategy or Robertson's "slow and gradual advance" and did not even raise the possibility of undertaking a decisive battle with his subordinates until 6 March.[80] The catalyst which drove Rawlinson to act was the remarks by Haig at a senior officers' conference on 5 March in which Haig finally vetoed Rawlinson and Davies' desire to pause after the capture of the village. Haig informed the gathered officers that "the idea is not to capture a trench here, or a trench there, but to carry the operation right through; in a sense surprise the Germans, carry them right off their legs, push forward to the AUBERS-HAUT POMMEREAU ridge with as little delay as possible, and exploit the success this gained by pushing forward mounted troops forthwith".[81]

On 6 March, Haig received Sir John French's official approval for the plans for the attack at Neuve Chapelle and was informed that he could choose the date of the attack as long as it was after midnight of 9 March.[82] Haig chose 7.30am on the morning of 10 March as the time for the artillery bombardment to begin and 8.05 for the infantry assault. His last diary entry prior to the attack indicates that Rawlinson made a last-ditch attempt to delay the advance on Aubers Ridge until Willcocks' Indian Corps attacked the Bois du Biez but Haig refused urging both commanders to pursue "a vigourous offensive".[83]

Once the battle began, Haig had little control over events. The initial assault took the Germans by surprise and, in the vast majority of places, the German front line trenches were captured with relative ease.[84] Haig, apparently buoyed by the initial successes ordered forward elements of the 2nd Cavalry Division which were under the orders of GHQ, which later countermanded the order.[85] Despite significant setbacks

78 Lloyd, 'With Faith and Without Fear', 1059.
79 Ibid., 1060.
80 TNA: WO95/1628/1, 'Capper to Rawlinson, 8 February 1915'; TNA: WO158/17, 'Memorandum on the Possibility of Undertaking Offensive Operations'; Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, 31.
81 NLS, Haig Papers, Acc.3155/171, Reports and Maps concerning action at Neuve Chapelle, March 1915, 'Notes at Conference on 5/3/15' [Haig's capitalisation].
82 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 6 March 1915.
83 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 9 March 1915.
84 The exception to this was on the extreme north of the British attack where the 2nd Middlesex and 2nd Scottish Rifles were held up by undamaged wire which caused a delay of several hours. It transpired that two 6-inch siege guns arrived from England without their platforms and consequently their shooting was inaccurate.
85 Harris, *Haig and the First World War*, 123.

later in the afternoon of 10 March, Haig ordered the advance to be resumed at 7am on 11 March with attacks by the 7th Division, 8th Division and Indian Corps on Aubers Ridge, La Cliqueterie Farm and the Bois du Biez respectively.[86] That attack and subsequent attacks achieved little against German troops who responded aggressively through co-ordinated counter-attacks. By 12 March, the element of surprise had been lost and the impetus of the British advance had disappeared, resulting in Haig calling off the offensive. The three days of fighting had cost the BEF some 13,000 casualties.

Before the dust had even settled the forensic examination of what had gone wrong began. Rawlinson, in visiting First Army headquarters was quick to put the blame at the feet of Major-General Davies, claiming that 8th Division had not pressed on and had spread their reserves around the battlefield.[87] Recommended for dismissal, Davies was able to demonstrate that it was, in fact, Rawlinson who had ordered the dispersal of the reserves and who had "delayed the advance from the village 'until 3.30pm'!".[88] The plans to remove Davies from his command were halted with Haig commenting that "Rawlinson is unsatisfactory in this respect, loyalty to his subordinates!". In a meeting with Sir John French on 17 March, French and Robertson considered sending Rawlinson home, and only Haig's intervention saved him from that fate.

Despite this, the Battle of Neuve Chapelle did have its positive points. It saw the first use of aircraft to photograph enemy trenches; saw the first prepared artillery schedule and the first 'hurricane bombardment'; and proved that it was possible to break into the German trenches, albeit at high cost. Indeed, the approach used at Neuve Chapelle became the blueprint for many of the attacks made by the BEF until 1917.

While the congratulatory messages for the initial successes of 10 March were still arriving at First Army headquarters, Haig was planning his next move; an attack by the 7th Division on the village of Fauquissart to the immediate north of Neuve Chapelle.[89] He found out the following day that "Sir John French approved of [his] plan of operations, but, there was no ammunition at present, as the expedition to the Dardanelles had to be supplied!"[90] Haig's assertion on 28 February that the attack was to be limited was indeed the case.

Of the senior commanders involved in the planning process, clear direction from GHQ and Sir John French is curiously absent. Rawlinson's conduct during the entire process was far from satisfactory. He dragged his feet in the planning stages from the very start and was happy to delegate to Capper and Davies. If this were not bad enough, he then continuously disregarded Haig's orders to plan for an attack on the

86 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 9 March 1915.
87 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 13 March 1915; Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, 70-71.
88 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 16 March 1915.
89 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', Haig to Robertson, 15 March 1915.
90 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 16 March 1915 [Haig's emphasis].

Aubers Ridge, right up until four days before the battle. Finally, and most critically, he delayed the advance of his troops for a number of hours and then sought to place the blame for the lack of success on to a subordinate officer. Rawlinson should have been dismissed for his conduct at Neuve Chapelle which was unsatisfactory from the very beginning.

And what of Haig? His belief in the decisive battle led to the selection of objectives which were beyond the reach of the BEF of March 1915. When the French withdrew their support, and ammunition and supplies were limited, Haig could have taken the decision, as he mentioned, to reduce the scope of his objectives. Yet he persisted, showing, as Harris comments, a lack of ability to "apply sustained, consistent logic".[91] His naivety and inexperience in battle planning was highlighted as early as 6 February when he suggested that First Army would be ready for the offensive with only ten days preparation. When Rawlinson dragged his feet for a second time on 15 February, Haig should have passed the planning of the battle to the staff of First Army. The scope of the operation, involving more than one corps demanded it. Strong leadership was required from First Army in February and March of 1915 and at corps, army and GHQ level it did not exist.

The planning of the aborted Fauquissart attack had the unfortunate effect of delaying the learning process from Neuve Chapelle. In Capper's 7th Division, the chief of staff, Colonel Hoskins, sent a request to the three infantry brigade commanders, plus the CRA and CRE, asking for their recommendations on how to "improve our training and arrangements for battle, what modifications in our formations for attack should be adopted, and generally what lessons we can deduce from our experiences".[92] Several trends emerge: the need for the infantry to be able to communicate their position to the artillery to avoid 'friendly fire' incidents; the need for guides to lead relieving battalions into the correct position to carry out reliefs; and the need for a chain of supply to the troops in the newly captured trench.[93] The 21st Brigade was the 7th Division formation most involved in the offensive action and as such, their report on the lessons learned at Neuve Chapelle contains more practical information on conducting the attack. Brigadier General Heyworth's report mentions that not too many men should be placed in the firing line; it gives the opinion that each fresh line of German trenches should be taken by a fresh line of British troops; and it highlights the importance of pushing on as fast as possible once the Germans are retreating, "as evidence proved, that give the Germans a few hours, and they immediately put up a strong resistance".[94] One of the key lessons of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle

91 Harris, *Haig and the First World War*, 118.
92 TNA: WO95/1628/2, Hoskins to 7th Division Infantry, Artillery and Engineer Commanders, 21 March 1915.
93 TNA: WO95/1628/2, Brigadier General Lawford to Hoskins, 22 March 1915; Brigadier General Heyworth to Hoskins, 23 March 1915; and Brigadier General Watts to Hoskins, 13 April 1915.
94 TNA: WO95/1628/2, Heyworth to Hoskins, 23 March 1915.

identified by the 7th Division was the need to keep the "higher commanders" in the rear accurately informed of the progress of the attack.[95] Indeed, this was a recurring problem for all formations throughout the war. Radio technology was in its infancy and underground telephone cables were more often than not destroyed by enemy fire which led to a reliance on runners physically transporting messages between front line and headquarters.

In terms of fire support, four main lessons were identified.[96] First, "indirect fire was adequate to cut wire and destroy the enemy trenches during a short bombardment"; second, the guns of the mountain batteries of the Royal Artillery were useless in the front line; third, "indirect fire was effective during a breakthrough only if the enemy could be located accurately"; and fourth, "some form of direct-fire capability must be provided" for the infantry during the breakthrough.[97] Perhaps the main lesson to be learned regarded battlefield communication. Once the advancing troops left their forming up trenches, command and control, at least between brigade, divisional and corps commanders and their subordinates "became progressively worse as the battle went on".[98] There was, however, no easy solution and the problems of battlefield communication dogged the BEF throughout the war.

For Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Rawlinson, the key lessons to be learned from the Battle of Neuve Chapelle were that "it is always possible by careful preparation and adequate Art[iller]y support by heavy Howitzers to pierce the enemy's line provided that his wire entanglements can be cut by the fire of our field guns".[99] By the start of April 1915, Rawlinson thought that "the origin of our heavy losses" was because "we had tried to do too much", the blame for which Rawlinson laid firmly at the feet of his superiors, French and Haig.[100] In order to not "do too much" again, Rawlinson adopted Capper's idea of taking a "bite" out of the enemy line and then "hold[ing] it against the inevitable counter-attack".[101] This more limited method of advancing went against First Army's preferred idea of fighting the "decisive battle", for which Haig continued to plan.[102]

While Rawlinson sought to modify British strategy in preparation for a subsequent offensive operation, the Commander in Chief, Sir John French was keen to revel in

95 Atkinson, *Seventh Division,* 156.
96 Martin Samuels, *Command or Control?: Command, Training and Tactics in the British and German Armies, 1888-1918* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1995), 105.
97 Samuels, *Command or Control?,* 105.
98 Niall Barr, 'Command in the Transition from Mobile to Static Warfare, August 1914-March 1915', in Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman (eds.), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience, 1914-1918* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2004), 35.
99 TNA: PRO30/57/51, Rawlinson to Kitchener, 15 March 1915.
100 TNA: PRO30/57/51, Rawlinson to Kitchener, 1 April 1915.
101 Rawlinson to Wigram, 25 March 1915, quoted in Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, 78.
102 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 30 April 1915.

"the defeat of the enemy and the capture of his position".[103] For French, the Battle of Neuve Chapelle was nothing more than the opening salvoes of the greater Allied "Battle of Lille" in which the British role was to support the larger attacks of the French Armies to the south.[104] The apportioning of credit for this victory led to friction in the high command. For Sir John French, this was a victory for the BEF; for Haig it was a victory for First Army. Haig's chief staff officer, Brigadier-General Richard Butler was ordered by GHQ to amend the official after-action report to show that the orders for the attack at Neuve Chapelle were given by French rather than Haig, something which the latter decried as "childish" behaviour.[105] For his part, Lieutenant-General Sir James Willcocks, commander of the Indian Corps, was content with the part played by his troops, writing later that "if we did not get as far as we had hoped to do … we taught the Huns a very sharp lesson".[106]

That much was true; the German Army did learn from the Battle of Neuve Chapelle. The delays in mid-March 1915 caused by the lack of artillery ammunition meant that the German commanders could turn "their light defences into semi-permanent fortifications".[107] That new defensive system was attacked on 9 May in a two-pronged advance from Neuve Chapelle in the south and Fauquissart in the north, with the objective being, once again, the Aubers Ridge, which subsequently gave its name to the battle. As Prior and Wilson have asserted, "[i]t would be reasonable to expect that, in planning and execution, Aubers Ridge would prove an advance on Neuve Chapelle".[108] It was, however, a bitter defeat. The original artillery plan used the model of that of Neuve Chapelle which had, except on the extreme left of the IV Corps front, seen considerable success. However, at Aubers Ridge, the front to be attacked was considerably longer yet the fire plan incorporated no additional heavy artillery. In practical terms, the British infantry attacked a larger, stronger German position with less of the key resources needed to complete the task. In addition, at Aubers Ridge, more of the British initial bombardment was directed on to positions in the rear of the German front line trenches. While this may have been an attempt to apply a lesson of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, where German second and third line positions had remained intact following the bombardment, it meant drawing even more of the heavy artillery away from the task of neutralising the primary objec-

103 Sir John French, quoted in Richard Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal: Sir John French* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), 281.
104 Sir John French, quoted in Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal,* 281.
105 NLS, Haig Papers, 'Typed Copy of Haig's Diary, vol.3', 28 March 1915.
106 Sir James Willcocks, quoted in George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front: India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 233.
107 A. Kearsey, *1915 Campaign in France: The Battle of Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Loos, considered in relation to the Field Service Regulations* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1929), vii-viii.
108 Prior & Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, 83.

tives. The German front line trenches remained unbroken, and only small parties of attackers were able to gain lodgments; these isolated groups were soon ejected as casualties mounted and ammunition ran short. With regards to the handling of the reserve forces, Haig did attempt to apply lessons from Neuve Chapelle to the Aubers Ridge problem. Fresh troops were to be used to attack positions after the initial assault and Haig was to assume command of one brigade from each of the attacking corps to use as an army reserve.[109]

Following the Battle of Aubers Ridge, Haig placed the blame for the lack of correct artillery provision on to his corps and divisional commanders. As de Groot has noted, Haig was always alert to correct the mistakes of his subordinates and his failure to do so implies tacit approval of their plans.[110] While Haig had not learned, nor applied, all of the lessons from Neuve Chapelle, the defeat at Aubers Ridge did not prove him to be an incompetent commander.[111] Perhaps the most crucial modification in Haig's thinking after Aubers Ridge is his abandonment of the hurricane bombardment, in no small part down to the lack of high explosive ammunition. The hurricane bombardment, which had been one of the successes of Neuve Chapelle, reappeared two years later and became a central component of the successes in the 'Advance to Victory' in autumn 1918.

Under pressure from GHQ, themselves under pressure from their French allies, Haig was ordered to quickly resume the offensive. The preparations for the Battle of Festubert appeared to show various attempts to learn from both Neuve Chapelle and Aubers Ridge. A lengthy preliminary bombardment expended some 100,000 rounds of artillery ammunition; to increase surprise and hopefully reduce casualties, Haig sanctioned the first night attack of the war to be undertaken by First Army; and crucially, the objectives set for the attacking troops on the first day were far more limited than either of the previous battles.[112] The results of the battle which was fought intermittently between 15-25 May were more positive that those from Aubers Ridge and may have restored Haig's confidence.[113] The Battle of Festubert, despite seeing some 16,000 casualties, was overshadowed by the 'Shells Crisis' in which the dire state of the ammunition supply to the BEF was highlighted through leaks made to Charles Repington, a friend of Sir John French and reporter for *The Times*.

Ordered to maintain the offensive, Haig sanctioned a small operation in mid-June to capture the the hamlet of Givenchy and the Rue d'Ouvert to the north. The attack was carried out by Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Rawlinson's IV Corps and was "a defeat as unmitigated as that of 9 May [Aubers Ridge] albeit on a smaller scale", incurring 3,500 casualties for no territorial gain.[114] Despite serious reservations regarding

109 Sheffield, *The Chief,* 113.
110 Gerard de Groot, *Douglas Haig, 1861-1928* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 187.
111 Harris, *Haig and the First World War,* 144.
112 Harris, *Haig and the First World War,* 145.
113 Harris, *Haig and the First World War,* 147.
114 Harris, *Haig and the First World War,* 150.

the plan and the objectives for the attack, Rawlinson did not transmit these thoughts further up the chain of command.[115] Beholden to Haig following the Davies affair in March, Rawlinson preferred to keep his command rather than speak out against First Army HQ.

The Battle of Neuve Chapelle and the subsequent actions of spring 1915 have been largely overlooked in the historiography of the First World War with one historian dismissing them as "niggardly in scale and short in duration".[116] While it is true that the battles of early 1915 were shorter than those of later in the war their importance should not be diminished. As the British official historian, Sir James Edmonds, wrote,

> For the British leaders of all ranks, the year 1915 was a period of education and instruction. It taught them the handling of hastily trained troops and improvised formations, the employment of the new instruments of war, and the methods to be used in the attack of well defended, continuous field positions. Neuve Chapelle, Aubers [Ridge], Festubert and Loos were most valuable lessons in the staging of an offensive and in the comprehension of the enemy's methods. These battles were definite steps for the preparation of the campaign of the Somme in 1916 and as such it is but fair to regard them.[117]

Note: An earlier, somewhat different version of this paper was published in the Records of the Douglas Haig Fellowship, Volume 17 (2015) as part of the award to the author of the Haig Scholarship for 2014.

115 Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front,* 99.

116 Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack, 1916–1918* (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1994), 14.

117 Sir James Edmonds et al., *History of the Great War based on Official Documents by Direction of the Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence, France and Belgium, 1915,* Vol.1 (London, HMSO, 1927), 3.

8

Inescapable Realities: Canadian Command, Spring 1915

Kenneth Radley

In June 1918 Sir Robert Borden, Prime Minister of Canada and member of the Imperial War Cabinet, met with Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie, the General Officer Commanding [GOC] the Canadian Corps, in London. Over the years a story has occasionally surfaced that Borden arranged a meeting between Currie and the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George. Currie, supposedly, greatly impressed Lloyd George, who later revealed his intention, if the war had gone into 1919, to make Currie Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force [BEF]. No mention of such arrangements or meeting appears in Borden's memoirs, which is curious and telling. The whole story, so far as we know, is as much a myth as the Angel of Mons. We do know that Sir Robert thought Currie "the ablest Corps Commander in the British Forces; more than that I believe he is at least as capable as any Army Commander among them".[1] However, at Second Ypres Currie was only a brigadier; as Hugh Urquhart, Currie's first biographer, pointed out "the Currie of 1915 was not the Currie of 1918, or for that matter of 1916".[2]

This essay examines the state of Canadian command in the spring of 1915, specifically during the Battle of Second Ypres, an event of marked significance, not only for a very young Canada, at that time still two years short of its fiftieth birthday, but also for 1st Division, then the country's sole formation on the Western Front.[3] The battle brought both face to face with the inescapable reality of war. The stakes were high,

1 Henry Borden, ed., *Robert Laird Borden: His Memoirs.* Vol. II (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1938), pp. 810, 818; Robin Neillands, *The Great War Generals of the Western Front 1914–1918* (London: Constable and Robinson Ltd., 1999), p. 519.

2 Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), RG 24, Vol. 1503, File 1/HQ 683-1-30-5, Urquhart to Col. A.F. Duguid, 5 December 1934.

3 The only 1st Division at Second Ypres was Canadian. Consequently, 1st Canadian Division will be shown as 1st Division or just "the" division. As the only 1st, 2nd and 3rd Brigades at Second Ypres were Canadian they will be shown, for example, as 1st Brigade. Canadian battalions will be shown simply by number.

for as Sir Ian Hamilton noted the only certainty of war was the fact that one side will lose.[4] Second Ypres was to be the making of several commanders, setting them on an upward path; others it confirmed as competent, able to do what officers must. Some officers would falter and suffer damage to their reputation, even bringing immediate ruin in one case. In this chapter the focus is upon infantry commanders, who as always face the severest test and must make the most critical decisions. It is the infantry, after all, who engage within visual range of the enemy, and it is only the infantry who carry out all four actions of war – move, fire, charge, and hold.

Before the Second Battle of Ypres, later dubbed the "big whoopdedo" by a somewhat cynical officer of the 8th Battalion, the three brigadiers and the 12 battalion commanders were unknown quantities. War presented them many inescapable realities. One stark truth facing the untried Canadian commanders was the recognition that they began without the confidence of superiors and counterparts. The officer corps of the British Army was a community apart, its members sharing strong regimental ties that provided networks for them throughout their careers: said one brigadier to his wife "I seem to know everybody and everyone me".[5] Dominion officers initially enjoyed few, if any, of the connections that only time and experience could supply.

The newly appointed division commander, Lieutenant-General E. A. H. (Edwin) Alderson, must have been somewhat uneasy as he awaited the arrival of his recently formed division, even though Canadians were not entirely unknown to him. Nor was he a complete stranger to them, for he had commanded Canadians in South Africa. Some remembered his "composure and the wisdom of his orders" during tight situations.[6] Questions remained over how Alderson's new subordinates would perform. This was entirely unpredictable, a point nicely made by Sir Ian Hamilton: "The emergence of a commander … is as great a mystery as that of the emergence of the queen-bee into the air".[7] These officers would need to form swift and strong working relationships, for the brigades and battalions of the new division having never worked together knew little of one another. On the plus side, Alderson knew how to command. Moreover, he knew that while control is part of command there is a key difference: "Command is often not *what* you do but the way you do it".[8]

The proverbial fog of war was another battlefield reality. Gas would thicken it up considerably. The enemy, of course, is a prime supplier of fog, but so are the foibles and failings of superiors, subordinates and staff officers, and the hubris, jealousy and national sensitivities that can affect the execution of a commander's will. All new

4 General Sir Ian Hamilton, *Gallipoli Diary* Vol. I (London: Edward Arnold, 1920), v.
5 LAC, RG 41, CBC Interview, Major C. Smellie; Simon Robbins, "The right way to play the game: the ethos of the British High Command in the First World War," *Imperial War Museum Review* 6 (1991), p. 42.
6 Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War 1899-1902* (Montreal: Canadian War Museum and McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), p. 237.
7 General Sir Ian Hamilton, *The Commander* (London: Hollis & Cater, 1957), p. 2.
8 Major-General Chris Vokes, *Vokes My Story* (Ottawa: Gallery Books, 1985), pp. 184, 186.

divisions were challenged by the reality of stress and strain engendered by inexperience, training shortcomings, unsuitable commanders ("dugouts" recalled to the colours, for example), lack of readiness and hasty mobilisation. The Canadian Division, in particular, suffered from the latter thanks to Sir Sam Hughes, the colourful and erratic Minister of Militia, who ignored the long-established mobilisation scheme based on existing regiments and instead issued "a personal call to arms, like the fiery cross" of earlier times.[9] His call created a shambles of order, counter-order, and ultimately disorder that disrupted training, administration and organisation. One command left just 80 Regular instructors at Valcartier training camp as the only pre-war Regular unit, the Royal Canadian Regiment, had been sent to Bermuda where it carried out guard duty until November 1915.[10] Without Hughes's sabotage 1st Division might well have reached France before Christmas rather than after. His claim in England that the division was fully trained was rejected, it being evident that the men, at best, were at the level of third-week recruits. The delay in joining the BEF aggravated everyone.[11] Nor could 1st Division escape the reality inherent in the politics of command that influenced relationships of Canadians to one another and to British superior officers and opposite numbers. Alderson had an additional worry for unlike other divisional commanders he had not only to keep his military superior happy, but was accountable to the Canadian Government. Balancing the two, although not a major consideration during the Second Battle of Ypres, would become trying almost immediately afterward.

Alderson wasted no time in assessing what he had, an urgent task, he being the driving force that would shape the first ever Canadian division. One aspect of this that may not always register with the general reader, or even with the reader more familiar with the early years of the war, resides in the division's very arrival, which demonstrated not only Canada's earnest commitment, but also its early deployment. How early may surprise many readers. 1st Division was the eleventh division to reach the Western Front, a considerable achievement for a country of less than eight million people, which had never fielded even a brigade, let alone a division.[12]

9 Daniel G. Dancocks, *Welcome to Flanders Fields The First Canadian Battle of the Great War: Ypres, 1915* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1988), p. 44; LAC, MG30E8, Sinclair Papers, Diary, 9 February 1915.

10 Kenneth Radley, *We Lead Others Follow: First Canadian Division 1914-1918* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2006), p. 56; Colonel A. Fortescue Duguid, *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War 1914-1919 General Series Vol. I Chronology, Appendices and Maps* (Ottawa: Printer to the King's Most Excellent Majesty, 1938), Appendix 133; LAC, RG9IIIC3, Vol. 4054, Folder 26, File 1.

11 LAC, RG 41, CBC Interview, Lt. Col. Hugh Urquhart.

12 Robin Spaight, *British Army Divisions in the Great War, 1914-1918: A Checklist* (Richmond, Surrey: Robin Spaight, 1978), pp. 11, 30. The first ten British divisions to reach the continent were the 1st to the 8th, 27th and 28th. The 29th Division, which formed in March 1915 went to Gallipoli in April. The last regular division, the Guards Division, was not formed until August 1915.

Except for foreign volunteers the officers and men were British subjects, many feeling as imperial as any Briton. Of the 33,267 men in the first contingent, 63% were from the British Isles or elsewhere in the Empire. Ian Sinclair, an officer with the 16th Battalion, thought that a very large proportion of the men in all the battalions were British born. 10th and 13th Battalions were both about 75% British born. Another officer found the Highland battalions, the 15th and 16th, to be almost 80% Scottish born. Sergeant Harold Baldwin remembered his 7th Battalion being mostly "Britishers," including the commanding officer [CO] and the adjutant. Many men were also former British soldiers and their professional skills were an invaluable gift. No exact figure can be put to their number, but almost 19,000 former soldiers made up 3% of the total strength of the Canadian Expeditionary Force [CEF]. A "large proportion" of 3rd Battalion, for example, were ex-regulars. 4th Battalion was said to be 40% South African War veterans.[13]

The divisional officers, whether British or Canadian born, were mostly drawn from the militia. A few were officers of the tiny pre-war Canadian Army, which stood at just over 3,000 all ranks in 1914. A handful were British Regulars on loan to Canada.[14] For example, when the first CO of the 4th Battalion fell ill Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Birchall, Royal Fusiliers, took command. The CO of the 10th Battalion was British born, as were most of the officers of 16th Battalion. 5th Battalion had a British born CO, second-in-command [2IC], adjutant and one company commander. Louis Lipsett, the first CO of 8th Battalion, was also a British Regular.[15]

As for staff officers, Canada in 1914 had almost none. C.E. Montague compared the staff to a trouser-button, there being "few to praise it while it goes on with its work, and very few to abstain from cursing it when it comes off". In all of Canada there were only a dozen Staff College graduates.[16] Canadian staff training had always

13 Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), p. 279; LAC, RG 41, CBC Interviews, Ian Sinclair, E. Seaman and V. Lewis; MG30E236, Villiers Papers, Vol. 4, Diary; Sergeant Harold Baldwin, *"Holding the Line"* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1918), p.7; Duguid, *Chronology, Appendices and Maps,* Appendix 86; Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989), pp. 50-51.

14 Colonel A. Fortescue Duguid, *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War 1914-1919 General Series. Vol. I Aug. 1914–Sept. 1915* (Ottawa: Printer to the King's Most Excellent Majesty, 1938), p. 53. At the outbreak of war 29 British Regulars held commissions in the Canadian Militia.

15 LAC, Service Records, Lt. Col. Arthur Birchall; Imperial War Museum, 76/170/1, Private E.W. Russell, "A Private Soldier's View on the Great War, 1914-1918," p. 46; Daniel G. Dancocks, *Gallant Canadians: The Story of the Tenth Canadian Infantry Battalion, 1914-1919* (Calgary: The Calgary Highlanders Regimental Trust Foundation, 1990), p. 6; H.M. Urquhart, *The History of the 16th Battalion (The Canadian Scottish) in the Great War, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1932), p. 415.

16 C.E. Montague, *Disenchantment* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1922), p. 35; Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War: Canadian*

been problematical, mostly because few militia officers could leave everything behind in order to attend the British Staff College which then consisted of two years of study. The Canadian Militia Staff Course could not meet demand, nor could its curriculum match that of the Staff College. 1st Division's only graduate had never held a staff appointment. Consequently, the primary staff officers of the division were, with one exception, British. Clearly then, British staff officers were instrumental in Canadian performance. Given that the British did not have a stock of graduates lying about like items in quartermaster stores, the British Army was very generous in the number and quality of those it gave to the four Canadian divisions: "They were the pick of the British Army … absolutely superb … the like of which no other corps had … We owe them an immense debt of gratitude".[17]

Canada could not provide the divisional commander. Of the three officers offered, Edwin Alderson looked the best choice. Aged 56 in 1915, he was not strikingly charismatic (such men are uncommon), but he was sound and reliable. Sir Robert Borden thought that while Alderson had his limitations he did his best, and during his tenure the Canadian Army distinguished itself. Borden also observed that often Alderson was right while Sam Hughes was wrong.[18]

Alderson has been variously assessed as "better than average" and a "good commander who had earned the respect" of subordinates. Conversely, he has also been called mediocre. In any case, his steadiness and long experience made for a good division. Experience gave him a strong set of previously tested concepts which he put to good use. Alderson had been in the Army since 1876, seeing service in several campaigns, but it was his experience of leading Canadians in South Africa that earned him command of the division in 1914. His primary staff officer, Colonel C.F. (Cecil) Romer, was a 46 year old Regular with wide experience. He was ably supported by another Regular, Lieutenant-Colonel G.C.W. Gordon-Hall, who would, for a brief and dramatic time during the battle, exercise sweeping powers and responsibility.[19]

Another challenging reality for Alderson and his division stemmed from being first in time and in title. The consequence of such distinction was expectation that neither departed nor decreased, whilst any failure or diminution provoked comment. Those

Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919 (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962), p. 10; Daniel G. Dancocks, *Legacy of Valour: The Canadians at Passchendaele* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1986), p. 115.

17 Radley, *We Lead Others Follow,* Appendix VI, Senior Staff Appointments; John Swettenham, *McNaughton.* Vol. I. *1887-1939* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1968), p. 167; Brian Bond, *British Military Policy Between the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 2. The British Army in 1914 had only 447 graduates.

18 Borden, *Robert Liard Borden,* pp. 42-43.

19 Major D.J. Goodspeed, *The Road Past Vimy: The Canadian Corps 1914-1918* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969), p. 40; Herbert Fairlie Wood, *Vimy* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1967), p. 53; Dancocks, *Welcome to Flanders Fields,* p. 84: Lt.-Col. E.U. Bradbridge, comp., *59th Division 1915-1918* (Chesterfield: Wilfred Edmunds Ltd., 1928). Romer took command of this division in early 1917.

who did not know the history of this non-Regular division tended to scrutinize it as if it, too, was Regular, like the first ten in France. The whole of the Empire looked on to see how Alderson's Canadians would perform. In March 1915, then, the division went to France where it came under instruction in the trenches beginning "the gradual establishment of a systematic and orderly trench routine … a process of great educational value".[20] Once judged fit the division took over a sector on its own, afterward playing a small part in the Neuve Chapelle attack, followed by a brief spell in reserve before marching northward to the Ypres Salient. Enroute the GOC Second Army bid them welcome to what he called a "lively" area. On reaching Belgium the 1st Brigade went into reserve west of Ypres town. Divisional headquarters [HQ] set up nearby. 2nd Brigade and 3rd Brigade kept on to the trenches of the French 11th Division roughly five miles east of Ypres. Here on 15/16 April they took over a front of 4,250 yards.[21]

Even before the move Canadians had heard about the evil reputation of the Ypres Salient, which had already cost the BEF dearly. In early October 1914 the Germans held Ypres briefly before being driven east a few miles. The salient's perimeter from Steenstraat five miles northwest of Ypres around to St. Eloi three miles south of Ypres was 17 miles long. In area, the salient was small, five miles in depth from Ypres to perimeter and at its base only eight miles wide. Two miles back from the perimeter was the G.H.Q. Line, the second line of defence. The salient was under observed artillery fire – such fire is accurate fire – from three directions and the enemy held the high ground that dominated it.[22] Alderson's instructions for defence stipulated that the perimeter would be held at all costs and any counter-attacks had to be immediate from the subsidiary line (the support trenches). He also described the G.H.Q. Line and how it would be held if that became necessary. Richard Turner, GOC 3rd Brigade, was to provide the Town Commandant of St. Julien, a key point within the salient.[23]

When Alderson designated Malcolm Mercer's 1st Brigade as reserve it left Mercer no opportunity to command his brigade for during the evening of the first day of the battle (22 April) half of it was sent forward to Turner. At 55 Mercer was a year younger than Alderson and the oldest of the brigadiers by more than a decade. A descendant of United Empire Loyalists who had left the rebel colonies, Mercer grew up in Ontario. While studying to be a barrister he joined The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada in 1888, becoming Lieutenant-Colonel Commandant of its two battalions in 1912. At six feet, fit and of soldierly appearance, Mercer was described as cool and

20 C.T. Atkinson, *The Seventh Division, 1914-1918* (London: John Murray, 1927), pp. 131-32.
21 R.C. Fetherstonhaugh, *The 13th Battalion Royal Highlanders of Canada 1914-1919* (Montreal: The 13th Battalion Royal Highlanders of Canada, 1925), pp. 40, 42.
22 Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, pp. 55-57; Major D.J. Goodspeed, *Battle Royal: A History of the Royal Regiment of Canada 1862-1962* (Toronto: The Royal Regiment of Canada Association, 1962), p. 93.
23 Duguid, *Chronology, Appendices and Maps,* Appendix 330a.

Lieutenant General Sir R.E.W. Turner GOC 3rd Brigade at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-008278)

Brigadier General G. Tuxford CO 5th Battalion at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-002805)

Major General Sir D. Watson CO 2nd Battalion at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-002116)

Brigadier General F.O.W. Loomis CO 13th Battalion at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-002192)

reserved, of even temper and with a gift for sometimes cynical humour. Those who knew him well thought him a born leader. While he had not been in South Africa, his militia record exceeded 30 years and so in 1914 he got a brigade. Once in France, preferring always to see for himself, he frequently visited forward trenches.[24] Mercer's Brigade Major [BM] was R.J.T. Hayter, a Staff College graduate and British Regular.

Mercer's 1st Battalion, which was raised in western Ontario, mostly in centres such as Windsor and London, was under Lieutenant-Colonel F.O.W. (Frederick) Hill, a 48 year old former mayor of Niagara Falls and pre-war CO of the Lincoln and Welland Regiment. 2nd Battalion's CO was David Watson, 46, formerly of the Royal Rifles of Canada, and by profession managing director of a newspaper. His men came mostly from eastern Ontario. Robert Rennie, a 52 year old businessman, who had commanded The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada before the war, on mobilization became the CO of the 3rd Battalion. He had a reputation as a precise and diligent officer. 4th Battalion was raised in central Ontario. Its second CO, 40 year old Lieutenant-Colonel Birchall, had trained militia in western Canada, his experience there being reflected in his *Rapid Training of a Company for War* which was into a third edition by 1915. He made a very strong impression, Private Guy Mills later describing him as "severe, straight, reserved". Birchall was killed during the battle.[25]

After parting from Mercer, the other two brigadiers moved forward to the perimeter, Turner's brigade taking the left next to a French division. When the German attack came on the 22 April his 13th Battalion was left forward next to the French, the 15th to its right and the 14th in reserve. 16th Battalion was in division reserve west of Ypres. Brigade HQ operated at Mouse Trap Farm.[26]

Richard Turner VC DSO, later Lieutenant-General Sir Richard, was 43 in 1914. In civilian life this slim, bespectacled officer had been a wholesale merchant in Quebec City. In South Africa he had made quite a name for himself, demonstrating a high order of courage that saw him awarded the DSO and the VC, the latter coming when he, with two others, saved two guns from being taken by charging Boers.[27] In due course he commanded a cavalry regiment and then a cavalry brigade. In 1914 he got 3rd Brigade. His Brigade Major, Lieutenant-Colonel Garnett Hughes, had only passed the Militia Staff Course, a fact that probably weighed upon him, especially

24 Lieutenant-Colonel W.T. Barnard, *The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada 1860-1960: One Hundred Years of Canada* (Don Mills: Ontario Publishing Company, 1960), p. 104; Gordon MacKinnon, "Major-General Malcolm Smith Mercer CB VD," *Stand To!* 74 (September 2005), pp. 39-44. In late 1915 Mercer took command of 3rd Division. He was killed on reconnaissance at Mount Sorrel in June 1916.

25 LAC, RG 41, CBC Interview, Pte. Guy Mills.

26 R.C. Fetherstonhaugh, *The Royal Montreal Regiment, 14th Battalion, C.E.F., 1914-1925* (Montreal: The Gazette Publishing Co. Limited, 1927), pp. 35-36.

27 Miller, *Painting the Map Red,* pp. 228, 274-75; Arthur Bishop, *Our Bravest and Our Best: The Stories of Canada's Victoria Cross Winners* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1995), pp. 19-21.

since, ironically, as the least qualified BM he was soon burdened with additional battalions.

Turner's brigade, known as the Highland Brigade, three of its four battalions wearing the kilt, included men from British Columbia, Manitoba and all points east. The 13th Battalion was under 44 year old Frederick Loomis, a contractor from Quebec and a long-serving militia officer. The non-Highland battalion, the 14th, consisted mostly of Montreal men under Frank Meighen, 44, a milling company executive and former CO of the Canadian Grenadier Guards. John Currie, a 46 year old Member of Parliament, led the 15th Battalion. Finally, 45 year old Robert Leckie commanded the 16th Battalion. A graduate of Royal Military College, Kingston, and a veteran of the South African War, Leckie would succeed Turner as brigade commander.[28]

Arthur Currie's 2nd Brigade defended the right of the divisional sector. His brigade consisted of one battalion from each of the four western provinces. 8th Battalion stood next to John Currie's 15th Battalion. The other forward battalion, and the right hand battalion of the brigade and of the division, was 5th Battalion. To its right was 28th Division. Currie put his 7th Battalion in reserve and his 10th Battalion was in divisional reserve west of Ypres. His brigade HQ opened at Pond Farm.

Currie is the subject of three biographies with, no doubt, more to come. Aged 38 in 1915, he was the youngest brigadier. A former elementary school teacher and later a partner in a real estate firm, his military career began in 1897 when he joined a militia artillery unit. Commissioned in 1900, he eventually became CO of the formation. In January 1914 he took command of a new infantry regiment. On mobilisation Currie accepted command of a brigade. By all accounts he was a quick learner, so much so that at Salisbury Alderson called Currie "out and out his best" brigadier.[29] Currie's Brigade Major, Lieutenant-Colonel Herbert Kemmis-Betty, was a British Regular and a Staff College graduate.

Currie was lucky in his battalion commanders. Lipsett he knew well. Two others had served in South Africa. The last, George Tuxford, born in Wales in 1874, was a hard-driving, rugged officer. In 1898 he had led the longest cattle drive in history, an epic trek of just over 1,700 miles across prairie and three mountain ranges between Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan and Dawson City in the Yukon. Tuxford personified determination. A long-serving militia officer, he commanded the 27th Light Horse, one of several cavalry units that built the 5th Battalion during the scramble called mobilisation. "Tuxford's Dandies" kept some cavalry ways, notably cavalry style bugle calls and a cap badge proclaiming "5th Western Cavalry," a title that gave rise to jibes such as "The Disappointed Fifth" and "The Wooden Horse Marines". Shrewd, colourful and

28 Urquhart, *16th Battalion,* p. 96. Urquhart's portrayal of Leckie as a first-class soldier was not universal. Some thought his battalion overly casual in a good many things. Currie, for one, considered Urquhart's account overly generous (LAC, MG30E100, Currie Papers, Vol. 15, Folder 43).

29 Daniel G. Dancocks, *Sir Arthur Currie: A Biography* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1985), p. 37.

outspoken, Tuxford ran a tight ship. His medical officer described him as a "fusser". Another officer admired Tuxford's courage – "lots of guts" – as many did, but also saw him as selfish, "bull-dozing, grabbing," characteristics that carried over since after his promotion some disliked him for his habit of snatching undue credit for himself.[30]

10th Battalion had an equally rugged CO. When Lieutenant-Colonel Russell Boyle, a 34 year old Alberta rancher and South African War veteran, learned at Valcartier that four men had threatened to "punch the hell out of him," he took off his tunic and dared them to step out of ranks. No one moved, Boyle being a formidably large and fit man known for his fiery temper. He would die of wounds at Second Ypres.[31] William Hart-McHarg, 45, led the 7th Battalion, a unit entirely from British Columbia. He had served in South Africa, an experience he related in *From Quebec to Pretoria with the Royal Canadian Regiment* (Toronto, 1902). He, too, died of wounds at Second Ypres.

The 8th Battalion had as CO 40 year old Louis Lipsett. Following graduation from Sandhurst in 1894 he served in India and then in South Africa, not returning to England until 1903 to enter the Staff College, having passed the entrance examination second of all the candidates who attempted it.[32] In 1911 he became General Staff Officer [GSO] for western Canada, one of many such appointments that aimed at standardising training within the Empire. A very smart, soldierly appearing officer, his appointment was applauded: "in lending Lipsett to Canada [England] made a selection that redounds to the sagacity of her Army management". As GSO Lipsett's personality and ability made him a "power for efficiency [that] gave him an influence [beyond that ever] wielded by any other officer". When in early 1914 he ran a Militia Staff Course his students included Lieutenant-Colonels Arthur Currie and Robert Leckie and then Major Garnett Hughes.[33] Those who thought Lipsett a hard taskmaster soon recognized a dedicated trainer and a born leader who did his best to instill discipline, self-confidence and the offensive spirit, especially in those who were "expected to supply the thinking part of the Army" – the officers. Lipsett possessed the saving grace of humour and what is often called the human touch; approachable

30 Russell, "A Private Soldier's View on the Great War," p. 17; Baldwin, *"Holding the Line."*, pp. 118-19, 140; LAC, RG 41, CBC Interview, Captain F.C. Bagshaw; Daniel G. Dancocks, *Spearhead to Victory: Canada and the Great War* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1987), p. 107.

31 Dancocks, *Gallant Canadians,* pp. 6, 10, 218.

32 Martin Gilbert, *The Challenge of War: Winston S. Churchill 1914-1916* (London: Mandarin, 1990), p. 637. Churchill and Lipsett were classmates at Sandhurst. The former passed out 20th of a class of 130. Lipsett came 34th.

33 Military Advisory Board, *Canada in the Great World War; an Authentic Account of the Military History of Canada from the Earliest Days to the Close of the War of the Nations.* Vol. III. *Guarding the Channel Ports* (Toronto: United Publishers of Canada Limited, 1919), p. 66; "Major-General Louis James Lipsett, C.B., C.M.G.," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 6 (April 1929), p. 296; Dancocks, *Sir Arthur Currie,* p. 24.

and untiring in the care of his men, he was, said Cyril Falls, "a good soldier and charming man".[34]

Lipsett and every Canadian were shocked by the utterly filthy trenches they took over from the French. Worse were the flimsy defences: no continuous line, just scattered, disconnected holes, inadequate sandbags and dugouts and parapets too thin to stop bullets. What little wire existed was "absurdly thin with many gaps". During that first night the second in command of the 10th Battalion walked right through the line without realising it, only halting when challenged by a German sentry. The "support line" shown on the French maps was in even worse condition.[35] For the week of quiet that remained before the German attack the men improved the position, connecting what trenches they could and laying what little barbed wire was available – the effect, unfortunately, often more suggestive than descriptive of wire entanglements.

Except for a rain of shells falling on Ypres town, Thursday 22 April began fairly quietly, the men going about normal trench routine. West of Ypres men in the reserve engaged in sports, training or "biffing up," a term for the endless cleaning of weapons and kit. Around 1700 tranquility was broken by heavy shelling on and behind the trenches, followed by an eruption of chlorine gas, about 160 tons of it hissing forth from over 5,000 gas cylinders, with a strong German infantry assault close behind it. The French to the left of 3rd Brigade, who received most of the gas, broke and fled. Canadians affected by the gas would have good reason to thank the medical officer of the 14th Battalion for his advice to urinate on handkerchiefs, or whatever they had, and then tie the cloth over nose and mouth.[36] The French rout opened a wide gap of about four miles (approximately 8,000 yards) on 1st Division's left flank. Turner now had to defend not only his original 2,000 yard front, but also a new front four times that along what had been the inter-divisional boundary. To his credit, Turner immediately moved his reserve unit, the 14th, forward to just north of his HQ. Little else was in place to stop the Germans, who by nightfall had taken Kitchener's Wood. Their advance had narrowed the Canadian area forcing troops and supplies coming forward to traverse a long corridor running along the new enemy line. Fortunately, the enemy stopped for the night thereby giving time for help to reach Turner.

34 LAC, MG30E60, Matthews Papers, Vol. 6, Folders 16 and 21; MG 30E100, Currie Papers, Vol. 37, File 165; Wood, *Vimy*, p. 69; Cyril Falls, "The Best of My War," in George A. Panichas, ed., *Promise of Greatness: The War of 1914–1918* (London: Cassell, 1968), pp. 230-31.

35 Kim Beattie, *48th Highlanders of Canada, 1891-1928* (Toronto: 48th Highlanders of Canada, 1932), p. 55; Fetherstonhaugh, *13th Battalion,* p. 42; Dancocks, *Gallant Canadians,* pp. 19-20; J. McWilliams and R.J. Steel, *Gas! The Battle for Ypres, 1915* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 1985), p. 33.

36 LAC, RG 41, CBC Interview, Pte. Joseph Sproston, 10th Battalion; Dancocks, *Welcome to Flanders Fields,* pp. 161-62. Urine causes chlorine to crystallize. Three days later some troops received cloth pads soaked in chemicals that crystallized chlorine. For later rescuing wounded soldiers the medical officer, Captain F.A.C. Scrimger, would win one of the four Canadian VCs at Second Ypres.

Had V Corps (Lieutenant-General Sir Herbert Plumer) then changed the divisional boundaries by making Gravenstafel-St. Julien inclusive to the 28th Division much confusion would have been avoided and it would not have been necessary to put the corps reserve under the GOC 27th Division, who did not know brigade dispositions or the enemy situation. For most of the time the forward brigades knew nothing of the presence and tasks of this GOC. As more units came forward to close gaps in the line they became mixed – "a distracting presence of detached battalions, doubtful of their own mission and removed from normal brigade control" – areas of command shifted and channels of command became confused. One can sympathise with Turner who at one point received separate orders from Alderson and from GOC 27th Division. Clearly, "a marked departure from usual methods" had developed. Notwithstanding, given the speed at which the situation worsened, and the pressing need to close gaps in the new front, it is hard to see how reinforcement could have been tidier.[37]

In fact, Turner and his brigade major had almost entirely created this situation, beginning around 1830 on the 22 April when the first of a series of erroneous reports went to division HQ which then forwarded them to V Corps. These painted a picture so critical, even hopeless, that it forced over-hasty and somewhat unmeasured decisions about reinforcements. As of late that night, V Corps thought St. Julien and Wieltje had been lost, 1st Division routed along with the French; even at noon the next day surprise shows in the V Corps War Diary: "Canadian Division are still in their fire trenches". Clearly, Turner and his brigade major did not know what was happening. Nor did Alderson and Plumer, a situation that would hardly endear Turner to them.[38]

It was approximately 2100 before Turner sent an accurate situation report, based, presumably, upon better unit reports, or perhaps the brigade major or his staff captains had made the rounds of the units: as the adage says, "Time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted". What had also hindered good staff work was small arms fire from Mauser Ridge only 500 yards away from the HQ, a situation such that one of the Staff Captains spent his time scraping up batmen and cooks for HQ defence. The circumstances further eroded Turner's tenuous control of the battle.

In response to one of Turner's erroneous reports, Currie had moved his 7th Battalion to Locality C on his left flank. Currie appreciated that Locality C was the vital ground, the feature that had to be held if he was to retain his line.[39] On arrival there the CO of the 7th immediately sent his second in command, Major Victor Odlum, on reconnaissance to see how things stood off to the battalion's left. Odlum contacted Lieutenant-Colonel Loomis, the Town Commandant of St. Julien, but learned little since Loomis was not even sure where his own companies were. Before returning to

37 Nicholson, *CEF,* p. 91; Dancocks, *Welcome to Flanders Fields,* p. 278; Duguid, *Official History,* Vol. I, p. 416; *Chronology, Appendices and Maps,* Appendices 616, 702.

38 Duguid, *Official History,* Vol. I, pp. 236, 238.

39 An appreciation of the situation is simply an orderly sequence of reasoning leading logically to the best solution to a problem.

Brigadier General V.W. Odlum CO 7th Battalion at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-2117)

Major General L. Lipsett CO 8th Battalion at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-7442)

Lieutenant General Sir A. Currie GOC 2nd Brigade at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-1370)

Lieutenant General Sir E.A.H. Alderson GOC 1st Canadian Division at Second Ypres. (Library & Archives of Canada/PA-5592)

the 7th Battalion, Odlum, ever the thorough officer, reported to Currie's HQ at Pond Farm where he gave Currie the only news he had had of the situation on the left. Repeated requests to Turner for information had gone unanswered.[40]

One looks in vain for the War Diaries that may or may not have been kept in April 1915. 1st Division "probably" kept one, but a "narrative of events" seems to have replaced it. It has even been claimed that 3rd Brigade's War Diary was destroyed in order to protect Turner's reputation. Other War Diary demolitions are said to have occurred. "Amplified" was the fate of at least one battalion War Diary.[41]

Near midnight on the 22 April the 2nd and 3rd Battalions, which had been detached from Mercer, reached Turner's HQ. Other reinforcements were allocated to Alderson: a British battalion at Brielen just north of Ypres and units from 27th and 28th Divisions and from 150th (York and Durham) Brigade. Earlier that evening Alderson released the 10th and 16th Battalions from divisional reserve and ordered Turner to use them to support a French attack to clear Kitchener's Wood. The 10th reached Turner first thanks to a warning order to the unit from Currie who had not waited for Alderson's release order. As always, Currie's mind said there was not a moment to lose: initiative contemplated, initiative implemented. The striking thing about the operation order for the attack is that it was the first attack order issued to Canadians during the war. For their first ever assault the two battalions would attack at night. No French troops would appear.[42]

At 2345, the battalions having reported "Ready," the Brigade Major, Garnett Hughes, gave direction as the North Star and Lieutenant-Colonel Boyle, 10th Canadians, ordered the advance, his battalion leading and the 16th immediately behind. Before starting several officers suggested to Boyle that a farm to the left of the wood should be taken, but Boyle rejected this as his orders did not allow such a "digression".[43] The assaulting troops soon encountered a tall hedge laced with barbed wire. This came as a complete surprise since no reconnaissance had preceded the assault. Noise made in getting through the obstacle alerted the enemy and the

40 Duguid, *Official History,* Vol. I, p. 242; LAC, MG30E300, Odlum Papers, Vol. 24, Miscellaneous Papers, undated narrative.

41 Tim Travers, "Currie and 1st Canadian Division at Second Ypres, April 1915: Controversy, Criticism and Official History," *Canadian Military History* (Autumn 1996), p. 14. This article, together with Travers, "Allies in Conflict: The British and Canadian Official Histories and the Real Story of Second Ypres (1915)," *Journal of Contemporary History* 24 (1989), assesses the diaries controversy. Denis Winter, *Haig's Command: A Reassessment* (London: Viking, 1991), p. 307; LAC, RG9IIID1, Vol. 4691, Folder 50, File I, "War Diary of 14th. Battalion". This document compares the "Original War Diary for April, May and June 1915" with the "amplified" version. To give just one example, the seven lines of the original entry for 22 April grew to 18 lines in the "amplified" version.

42 Duguid, *Chronology, Appendices and Maps,* Appendix 388.

43 Duguid, *Official History,* Vol. I, p. 253; Nicholson, *CEF,* p. 66; LAC, MG30E236, Villiers Papers, Vol. 4, File 7, Diary of Operations; RG9IIID3, Vol. 4870, Reel T10668, Report of Major D.M. Ormond, 28 April 1915.

resulting hail of fire swiftly reduced the two battalions. The 10th lost Boyle, its second in command, two-thirds of its officers and half its men. The unit adjutant, Major Ormond, assumed command. Leckie's 16th suffered 50% casualties.

Daniel Dancocks has argued that Hughes could have been more "helpful" in organising the attack but does not suggest how. What more Hughes could have done is unclear; perhaps Dancocks thought Hughes, rather than a staff captain, should have guided the units into the assembly area for the attack. Given the situation, Hughes's place was with the brigade HQ, which now had six battalions, its own four and 10th and 16th, to concern itself about.[44] 3rd Brigade HQ seemed to have settled down after earlier sending its first accurate situation report. The initial erroneous reports are a prime example of poor staff work. At the very least, military reports of any kind should be clear; instead they were ambiguous, defying the convention that said a report should be understandable at first reading. Instead, the reports had spoken of being forced back and occupying the G.H.Q. Line, text that would make any reader think the worst.[45] It is fair to say that Turner was poorly served by his brigade major, whose performance largely explains Currie's later opinion of Hughes. As for Turner, he either left the reports entirely to Hughes or he did not read them as critically as he should have. The reports did nothing for his reputation.

Late on the night of the 22 April the brigades still held their original positions. While the gap on the left remained open, measures were underway to close it. When the 2nd and 3rd Battalions reached Turner he decided that rather than put them to gap-closing he would hold them until he knew the results of the attack on Kitchener's Wood. On being so informed he ordered the 2nd to reinforce Leckie at the wood. Once there Lieutenant-Colonel Watson ordered one company to take the farm to the left of the wood and another to clear the last enemy from the forest. This company was virtually obliterated.[46] Turner moved half the 3rd Battalion to support Watson.

Shortly after 0100 on the 23 April V Corps made four battalions under Lieutenant-Colonel A.D. Geddes, CO of the 2nd East Kent Regiment, available.[47] Geddes remained in command of this group, hence the designation "Geddes' Detachment".[48] Alderson's decision not to put one of his own officers in charge of the ad-hoc force generated questions after the war. The first came from Colonel A.F. Duguid, the author of the first (1938) one volume Canadian official history. Duguid's question was perfectly valid, even though the other candidate for command, Malcolm Mercer, was

44 Dancocks, *Gallant Canadians,* p. 29.
45 Duguid, *Official History,* Vol. I, pp. 236, 240.
46 Duguid, *Chronology, Appendices and Maps,* Appendix 394; LAC, MG30E69, Watson Papers, Diary 23 April 1915; RG9IIID3, Vol. 4870, Reel T10668, Report of Major D.M. Ormond, 28 April 1915. Ormond believed that only 10-15 men of the 2nd Battalion even reached the wood.
47 Nicholson, *CEF,* p. 67.
48 For further details of the actions of Geddes' Detachment, see Tom Williams's chapter elsewhere in this volume.

by no means as "obvious" as Duguid asserted. Duguid's comment that "no regular British battalion was in the line under a Canadian brigadier during the battle" perhaps alludes to what he saw as reluctance to entrust British units to Canadian officers. More recently, Dancocks thought Alderson's choice "can only be construed as a vote of non-confidence in Mercer personally and perhaps in Canadian officers generally". Dancocks seems not to have consulted Duguid's assessment of the relative merits of Geddes and Mercer.[49] This "controversy" now looks something far less than that; a question, yes, but no more. Nor does it appear in the later (1964) Canadian official history, or in the British official history. Postwar, F.W. Hill, one of Mercer's battalion commanders, did not think Alderson's choice "necessarily a reflection upon the professional ability of Canadian officers". Alderson simply thought Geddes the better choice because of his experience.[50] Geddes, as it turned out, performed admirably during his short time in command. He was killed on 28 April.

Around 0400 Alderson learned that the French had promised an assault on Mauser Ridge to close a gap there and that he was to co-operate. Mercer was ordered to bring his 1st and 4th Battalions forward for this purpose. Once in the assembly area Birchall of the 4th could see no French troops, but thinking them behind a hedge where he could not see them, he ordered the attack. It was brought to a shuddering halt by fierce fire with both battalions suffering over 400 casualties each. Birchall and his second in command were killed.[51] That afternoon other British units closed the gap that had extended westward of Mouse Trap Farm. By late afternoon on the 23 April a thin continuous line had been established.

A warm and cloudless Saturday, 24 April, marked "a great and terrible day" for Canada. So, too, for the eight battalions holding the nose of the salient from the boundary with the 28th Division round to Kitchener's Wood. At 0400 the Germans landed a solid punch that aimed to break through, take St. Julien and penetrate to the rear. An intense bombardment, plus gas on a 1,200 yard front straddling the 8th and 15th Battalion boundary, preceded a determined infantry attack. The 8th stood its ground, despite heavy fire, gas and the serious shortcomings of the Ross rifle, the latter a sorry political tale which cost the infantry a price in blood.[52] However, the Germans broke through the 15th Battalion and by 0630 were behind the 13th Battalion and had outflanked 2nd Brigade. If they took Locality C then Currie's two forward units would be cut off. Lipsett immediately deployed his only reserve to guard against an enemy advance from Locality C. Tuxford of the 5th assisted Lipsett. Turner, too, reacted quickly, but in half-measure, ordering the 10th and 16th

49 Dancocks, *Welcome to Flanders Fields,* p. 194; Duguid, *Official History,* Vol. I, pp. 266, 416.
50 F.W. Hill, "History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War: A Review," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 16 (2) (1939), pp. 211-14.
51 Nicholson, *CEF,* p. 70.
52 Duguid, *Official History,* Vol. I, p. 292. For a detailed account of the Ross rifle's origin, faults, detractors and supporters and its replacement by the reliable Lee-Enfield, see Radley, *We Lead Others Follow.*

Battalions to leave Kitchener's Wood, the former to report to Currie and the latter to the G.H.Q. Line. When the remnants of the 10th Battalion, 170 men under Major Ormond reached him, Currie sent them to Lipsett, along with two companies that were his only reserves. This enabled Lipsett to retain his position, but his grip was tenuous and enemy pressure was increasing.

By 1100 the COs of 7th and 15th Battalions and the second in command of the 14th, unable to contact 3rd Brigade HQ, withdrew by 300 yards, losing half the 7th Battalion in the process. Ninety minutes later the survivors were forced to fall back a thousand yards back to the Wieltje-Gravenstafel Road. This opened St. Julien to direct attack. Earlier, in response to pleas for help, Alderson told Turner that the 150th (York and Durham) Brigade, under Brigadier-General Bush, would contact him and act as a reserve for 2nd and 3rd Brigades. An hour later Alderson added a rider: Turner could call on Bush for help, but only if "absolutely" necessary. An hour passed. Alderson then told Turner he could use two of Bush's battalions to counter-attack.[53] The reality called the fog of war was definitely thickening. What would transpire in the afternoon was reminiscent of a certain charge at Balaclava, although the question would not be 'Guns? What Guns?' but 'Line? What Line?'

The remainder of the day proved very trying for Turner – and for Currie. Each made questionable decisions. Just before 1300 Colonel Romer at division HQ advised Turner that the counter-attack by 150th (York and Durham) Brigade was cancelled, a conversation he confirmed by message: "you must not counter-attack but utilise the battalions of York and Durham Brigade to strengthen your line and hold on". Fifteen minutes later, in evidence of some confusion, another message from division told Turner that the York and Durham Brigade had been ordered to support the counter-attack. At 1335 Turner and Romer spoke again, the former, in the Canadian official historian's words, understanding "his instructions to be that he should hold St. Julien as long as possible and then occupy the G.H.Q. Line".[54] We do not know what Romer replied, but at 1430 Turner told Bush's two battalions, Mercer's 2nd and 3rd Battalions and his own four battalions to hold the G.H.Q. Line. He also told them how to withdraw to it. It is hard to believe that Colonel Romer, Staff College graduate, Regular officer, veteran of 1914, chief staff officer to Alderson and the author of the "Scheme of Defence, Canadian Division" (issued 17 April) did not there and then set Turner straight as to which line he was to hold. Before midnight Turner advised

53 Duguid, *Chronology, Appendices and Maps,* Appendices 544, 554, 556, 557.

54 In 1936 Col. Duguid told the Canadian Chief of General Staff [CGS] that this was not the whole story, but in the official history "out of consideration for General Turner … his actions and their results are made clear without comment and without stressing what [Lieutenant-Colonel and 1st Division staff officer] Gordon-Hall describes as their "disastrous" consequences. The first volume of the Canadian official history was published in 1938. Turner died in 1961. (LAC, RG 24, Vol. 2680, File 2/HQC 4950, letter to CGS, 23 June 1936).

Alderson that at the G.H.Q. Line were the "remains" of four Canadian and four British battalions, around 3,500 men in all.[55]

V Corps' reaction to Turner's withdrawal reached Alderson just before midnight. Corps HQ was dismayed that Turner had abandoned ground gained earlier and, worse, had left 2nd Brigade in the air. Corps ordered establishment of a new line as far forward as possible, in touch with troops left and right, and, if necessary, Alderson was to appoint an officer to take command and execute said orders. The corps commander "suggests," said the message, that a staff officer go forward to deal with the situation on the spot. The import of this is unmistakable. News of Turner's withdrawal surprised and mortified Alderson. No divisional commander likes to hear such tidings from his superior for it puts his credibility at risk.[56]

Lieutenant-Colonel Gordon-Hall went forward armed with sweeping powers to issue any orders he thought fit, including putting another officer in command. On arrival he reviewed the situation, consulted and formed a plan to close the gap and issued orders to Currie and his Brigade Major, Hughes (3rd Brigade) and Brigadier-General Bush, who would execute the corps order. Turner, meanwhile, was enroute to Alderson's HQ to clarify channels of command. This latter meeting left both officers convinced that the other did not understand what was happening.[57]

One historian speculated that Turner's withdrawal was not misunderstanding, but deliberate disobedience, an opinion based on Gordon-Hall's later recollection of Turner's propensity to keep reserves in hand rather than use them to reinforce forward positions: "disastrous consequences for all … I don't think enough is made of the overcrowding in G.H.Q. Line and to the resultant casualties … It had a magnetic attraction for Turner".[58]

Turner's withdrawal meant the loss of the nose of the salient, and St. Julien, which fell at 1500. To withdraw without notifying Currie was inexcusable. His 5th and 8th Battalions still held their lines, but the gap on his left remained open. This, plus the gap in his rear, posed a terrible threat to the brigade's survival. By noon Currie knew the projected 150th (York and Durham) Brigade counter-attack was not going to happen. Fortunately, as 3rd Brigade was withdrawing to the G.H.Q. Line, five British battalions intervened in the gap that had given the enemy a chance to put 2nd Brigade and possibly 28th Division in the bag. Also, two other British battalions helped establish a coherent line along 2nd Brigade's left flank. While a subsequent attempt to re-take St. Julien failed, the attack did close the gap there.

55 Duguid, *Chronology, Appendices and Maps,* Appendices 330a, 580, 584, 586.
56 Duguid, *Chronology, Appendices and Maps,* Appendix 634.
57 Nicholson, *CEF,* p. 80. Earlier Turner had not complied with an order from GOC 27th Division thinking it contrary to what he thought Alderson wanted him to do. Turner was not aware that the GOC 27th had been given command of all troops in corps reserve.
58 George Cassar, *Beyond Courage: The Canadians at the Second Battle of Ypres* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1985), p. 128; LAC, RG 24, Vol. 1503, File 1/HQ 683-1-30-5, Gordon-Hall to Duguid, 16 January 1935; Duguid, *Chronology, Appendices and Maps,* Appendix 632.

All of this good news happened after Currie took a decision at 1300 that could have wrecked his reputation and his career. Thinking that someone had to find and get reinforcements forward, Currie reasoned that he had to do it since as a general officer he was more likely to succeed than a more junior officer. He would not return to his HQ until "just after dark".[59] At 1345 the Brigade Major, Kemmis-Betty, reported Currie "missing" and announced that Lipsett was in command. Lipsett was not the senior Lieutenant-Colonel, but Tuxford, who was, and Boyle and Hart-McHarg had earlier agreed that if anything happened to Currie, Lipsett would command. This says a great deal about Lipsett, a professional who habitually displayed the initiative, resourcefulness and determination that make for a very good CO. By "begging, pleading, cajoling" he collected about a thousand men from neighbouring British units and placed them where they could help maintain a coherent line. It helped that Lipsett was richly endowed with charisma and enviable personal characteristics: in Tuxford's words "one of those men you call God's gentleman". Under Lipsett and the Brigade Major, Kemmis-Betty, 2nd Brigade functioned effectively during Currie's absence. Lipsett had done what Currie should probably have done: first re-organise internally, and then seek out reinforcements in the immediate vicinity.[60]

Currie undoubtedly took a great risk, as it is usually best that a commander remain where most of his command is located. Some historians have called his chosen course extreme. Major, later Lieutenant-Colonel, Hugh Urquhart thought it "a well-intentioned [but] ill-advised step," one born of an uncommon instance of poor judgement. Despite Currie's earnest efforts he was unable to get help from 150th (York and Durham) Brigade, or from GOC 27th Division. His meeting with the latter would become a matter of bitter dispute after the war. In the end, Currie gathered between 100 and 300 stragglers and got them forward.[61]

The other controversy concerns the three times, twice on 24 April and once on 25 April, at which Currie ordered a withdrawal. A great deal has been made of these orders. At 1135 on the 24 April he ordered 5th and 8th Battalions to withdraw to Gravenstafel Ridge, an order that does not appear in his report on operations probably because the order was not carried out, Lipsett and Tuxford having decided to hang on; in Lipsett's view they would be "cleaned out" if they retired.[62] His second order

59 LAC, MG30E100, Currie Papers, Vol. 8, File 22, letter of 24 April 1926 to Duguid. Currie said "just after dark". At 2300 he sent a message to division from his HQ (Duguid, *Chronology, Appendices and Maps,* Appendix 632.

60 Duguid, *Chronology, Appendices and Maps,* Appendices 587, 587a; Saskatchewan Provincial Archives, R.2.247, "The Great War as I Saw It," Memoirs of Brigadier-General George Tuxford; Dancocks, *Welcome to Flanders Fields,* p. 280; McWilliams and Steel, *Gas!,* p. 131.

61 Cassar, *Beyond Courage,* p. 139; Nicholson, *CEF,* p. 77; LAC, RG 24, Vol. 1503, File 1/HQ 683-1-30-5, Urquhart to Duguid, 5 December 1934; MG30E100, Currie Papers, Vol. 8, File 22, letter to Duguid, 24 April 1926.

62 Duguid, *Chronology, Appendices and Maps,* Appendix 566; LAC, RG9IIID3, Vol. 4870, 2nd Brigade Narrative of Events, 22-27 April 1915; Travers, "Currie and 1st Canadian Division at Second Ypres," p. 7.

for withdrawal came just before he left to find reinforcements. Currie told Lipsett that he could conform to a retirement of troops on his left if circumstances warranted. Currie appreciated that "Lipsett felt he might have to retire, but he did not wish to do so without an order. As he was the man on the spot I left it to his judgement … Lipsett and myself had a very clear understanding about it. Fortunately, he did not use the order".[63] The third order came around 1700 on Sunday, 25 April, when having concluded "our position … hopeless" Currie ordered a withdrawal at dusk to the streams behind the original line. Once there Lipsett and Tuxford realised that only they had withdrawn, so they returned to their line beside the Royal Fusiliers. Tim Travers describes the three orders as "probably hasty". The first and last certainly were. The second was not so much hasty as inevitable in view of Currie's decision to leave his HQ. Lipsett quite naturally wanted something to show he was acting under orders should Currie not return.[64]

For a good many officers and men the battle was their last. In all, 1st Division lost 208 officers and 5,829 Other Ranks [ORs], 90% of these in the three infantry brigades, each suffering about 1,800 casualties.[65]

Malcolm Mercer ended the battle neither distinguished nor diminished by it. As reserve brigade commander, what he had to do he did competently, but no great opportunity to stand out occurred. Turner, however, came away a reduced figure, his performance having raised questions about his suitability for field command. The flies in the ointment first surfaced on 24 April when he was clearly confused and produced a flow of erroneous reports. The situation was compounded by a brigade major who was not up to his task and a CO who proved the weakest in the division. Given these problems, it was unfortunate that Turner had to be concerned with a counter-attack by the 10th and 16th Battalions and had to take under him the two units sent from 1st Brigade. His decision to withdraw, whether born of misunderstanding or deliberate disregard, could have resulted in the destruction of 2nd Brigade. Afterward, Alderson so distrusted Turner that he tried to prevent him getting 2nd Division "but Canadian politics have been too strong … and so he has got it".[66] No author has tackled Turner as a subject; he has no biographies or dissertations, and has only been discussed in a single journal article.[67] A celebrated soldier and a war hero before 1914, Turner was

63 LAC, MG30E100, Currie Papers, Vol. 8, File 22, letter to Duguid 24 April 1926.

64 LAC, RG9IIID3, Vol. 4870, 2nd Brigade Narrative of Events 22-27 April 1915; Dancocks, *Welcome to Flanders Fields,* pp. 300, 303; Travers, "Currie and 1st Division at Second Ypres", p. 9.

65 Cassar, *Beyond Courage,* p. 192.

66 Letter from Alderson to Lt. Gen. Sir E.T.H. Hutton, 21 August 1915, quoted in Cassar, *Beyond Courage,* p. 208. Hutton and Alderson were close, the friendship going back to the South African War where they had served together. In 1898 Hutton had been GOC Canadian Militia. He knew Canadian politics well. See also Miller, *Painting the Map Red,* Chapter Three.

67 Thomas P. Leppard, "'The Dashing Subaltern' Sir Richard Turner in Retrospect," *Canadian Military History* 6 (2) (Autumn 1997), pp. 21-28.

much less so after 1914, and this is no doubt off-putting to many who might think to take on such a topic.

As for Currie, he displayed far better leadership than Turner. Dancocks, for one, probably went too far, being inclined to see Currie as a military genius. He made, after all, some questionable calls. Despite leaving his HQ for an extended time, and despite the withdrawal orders, Currie's calm in a crisis was evident. He read situations well, he responded promptly and soundly to exigencies and he exercised firm control of his brigade. Unlike Turner, he knew what he was about. He could read ground, a vital attribute for any commander: his decision to hold Locality C was crucial. While his personality was such that he could not inspire troops, Currie was the bright spot at Second Ypres. For three long days his brigade delayed and held back the Germans. He met expectations and more, for Alderson unreservedly recommended Currie for divisional command. Sir John French agreed.[68]

Of the 12 infantry Lieutenant-Colonels, three were killed. Of the nine survivors, seven would attain brigade command, four before 1915 ended. Three would in due course command divisions. Meighen of 14th Battalion was promoted immediately after the battle, but never commanded a brigade in the field.[69] Rennie of 3rd Battalion watched his companies being doled out here and there to meet emergencies. Consequently, he had little chance to show his ability. He did, however, get a brigade and made a short list, compiled by Currie in April 1918, of brigadiers considered suitable for divisional command. Rennie was not so advanced.[70] Watson of 2nd Battalion led with considerable distinction: "His lean, seamed face, with its twisted, sardonic smile … had been seen at every crisis point". His battalion had the highest number of casualties in 1st Brigade. During the withdrawal Watson was the last man out of his positions. Upon finding a wounded man he carried him out. He became a brigadier and then got 4th Division when it formed.[71] Hill of 1st Battalion lost half his unit when he was ordered to send two companies to support the attack on Mauser Ridge. When more of his unit also went there Hill had little to command and does not feature much in accounts of the battle. He eventually got a brigade and appeared on Currie's list, but did not get a division.

Loomis of 13th Battalion was more in evidence, inevitably so given his unit's forward location and because he was also Town Commandant of St. Julien, a primary enemy objective. The split responsibility was unenviable. He defended the town with courage and determination, being awarded the DSO for his efforts, the only CO so recognized at Second Ypres. Like Hill, Loomis featured on Currie's 1918 list, but he

68 John Swettenham, *To Seize the Victory: The Canadian Corps in World War I* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1965), p. 96.

69 Fetherstonhaugh, *14th Battalion,* p. 62. Meighen's promotion does not seem to have resulted from his service during the battle. In 1918 he reverted to Lt. Col. so he could take command of 87th Battalion in 4th Division.

70 LAC, MG30E100, Currie Papers, Correspondence (C-U), Vol. 3, 2 April 1918.

71 Wood, *Vimy,* p. 69; Cassar, *Beyond Courage,* pp. 132-33.

actually got a division. Of the nine surviving battalion commanders Loomis was one of the top four. Leckie of 16th Battalion displayed great leadership during the attack on Kitchener's Wood and afterward until his unit was withdrawn to the G.H.Q. Line where he was not particularly visible – but neither was anyone else there.

Sometimes rain accompanies sunshine. John Currie of 15th Battalion left the division in May on "Alderson's insistence on sick leave [to] recover from a touch of gas".[72] In fact, John Currie was fired, sent home and promoted to Colonel, which made him too junior for brigade and too senior for battalion, an in-between that kept him away from troops. John Currie's name appears only three times in Beattie's account of the battle, a very low profile for a CO. He also displayed curious priorities; at one point, as he said himself, he went back to Ypres to look for stragglers.[73] At another he parked himself in 2nd Brigade's Report Centre from which he had to be "man-handled" out, this causing speculation that he was drunk, or suffering from what came to be called shell-shock. John Currie ended up in Boulogne. Turner told him by wire to "Return at once or you will be placed under arrest".[74]

It is curious how a good commander who can cope with lesser lights will often have first rate subordinates. So it was with Currie who had three of the four best battalion commanders: George Tuxford, Louis Lipsett and Major Victor Odlum, acting CO 7th Battalion. Odlum displayed stamina, determination and battlefield sense. His unit had the highest number of casualties in 2nd Brigade. He let nothing dismay him. Having been transferred to 3rd Brigade due to tactical necessity, he led his battalion for over five hours without receiving a single reply to any of his messages to Turner: "We had no information as to their plans and intentions. We were in a position particularly perilous … we were orphans".[75] Odlum exhibited strong leadership throughout. No one doubted that he would get permanent command of the 7th Battalion. Later he got a brigade in 4th Canadian Division and made Currie's list, but was not promoted.

George Tuxford proved able and dependable. He, too, showed he could read a battlefield and he kept a firm grip on his unit. He and Lipsett shared a close friendship. Tuxford proudly said that the 5th and the 8th Battalions always "partnered in the line" their relationship, personal and unit, in "perfect harmony".[76] These two battalions had remained in or near the original divisional lines until ordered to withdraw on 25-26 April. This says a good deal about their leadership. Tuxford eventually

72 Beattie, *48th Highlanders,* p. 84.
73 J.A. Currie, *'Red Watch': With the First Canadian Division in Flanders* (Toronto: McClelland, Goodchild and Stewart, 1916), pp. 258-59.
74 LAC, MG30E8, Creelman Papers, Notes by Col. A.F. Duguid. Boulogne was one of the ports from which leave boats sailed to England. National Archives and British Library, Edwin Alderson Correspondence, letter to Lt. Gen. E.T.H. Hutton, 20 September 1915. In this letter Alderson referred, but not by name, to his "worst" battalion commander who had "practically" abandoned his men at Second Ypres.
75 LAC, MG30E100, Currie Papers, Vol. 24, Odlum to Currie, 24 April 1915.
76 LAC, RG 24, Vol. 1829, GAQ 7-35, p. 4, letter to Duguid, 15 April 1926.

commanded 3rd Brigade and did so with distinction. However, he was impatient with administration including staff duties and sometimes discipline. He did not get a division.[77]

As for Louis Lipsett, he was far and away the outstanding CO. He would prove an excellent brigadier and at 42 became the youngest of the four Canadian divisional commanders. Arguably, he was also Canada's best. Most comments about him include the word "fearless". His 8th Battalion, instrumental in 2nd Brigade's tenacious defence, suffered severely, losing 20 officers and 500 other ranks. Some senior officers are admired by their men, less so by their officers. With others the reverse applies. Lipsett was admired by all. Favourable comments so outnumber unfavourable that finding one of the latter is remarkable. Throughout the war Lipsett never lost his desire to find new ways to torment the enemy. Winston Churchill, when commanding a battalion in March 1916, recalled that Lipsett, then a brigadier, came "out with me on a patrol … to see if there was any possibilities to bring off an enterprise against the German trenches".[78] If there was any Canadian senior commander at Second Ypres with charisma it was Lipsett. Will Bird, no admirer of any officer, thought Lipsett mightily impressive, so much so that in 1930 he still had a postcard sized snapshot given to him by Lipsett.[79] His men remembered him as the most approachable general they ever encountered; "the men loved him," said Major C. Smellie of the 8th Battalion. He thought Lipsett should have gotten the corps, not Currie. It is not possible to say how common this view was. When Lipsett was killed in late 1918 "no officer lost by Canada in the whole war was more regretted by the men he led".[80]

1st Division left the salient with enhanced skills and knowledge and a good reputation. For one thing, officers and men had acquired battle discipline. For another, the men now had confidence in themselves and in their officers. Overall, the battalion commanders had proven a surprisingly good lot, most not especially notable, but competent and fit to command.[81] All ranks had a new, strong sense of pride and high morale. Edwin Alderson put it this way: "I have never been so proud of anything in my life as I am of this armlet with '1 Canada' on it that I wear on my right arm".[82] Henceforth, 1st Division would demonstrate what Sir Ian Hamilton saw as the

77 Tuxford's brigade was involved in the looting of Arras in March 1918 by British and Canadian troops. This may have been what kept him off Currie's list. A detailed account of the Arras affair is in Kenneth Radley, *Get Tough Stay Tough: Shaping the Canadian Corps, 1914-*1918 (Solihull: Helion & Company Limited, 2014).

78 Gilbert, *The Challenge of War,* p. 745.

79 Will R. Bird, *Ghosts Have Warm Hands* (Nepean, Ontario: CEF Books, 1997), pp. 14-15.

80 LAC, RG 41, CBC Interview, Major C. Smellie; *Guarding the Channel Ports,* p. 66.

81 Only one was under 40. Such a striking demographic would not last for long.

82 LAC, RG 24, C5, Vol. 1813, File 5-15K, "Words spoken to First Canadian Division". An armlet or brassard was worn by staff officers and formation commanders. Divisional armlets, which were red, had the number of the division superimposed in black lettering.

military essence: system, education, soul and fire.[83] It would also typify the professional soldier's spirit: the division (or regiment or battalion) that does not think itself best is not worth a damn. Officers and men not of the division came to think of it as pretty fine, too. Robert Graves believed it "a matter of pride to belong to one of the recognised top-notch divisions – the Second, Seventh, Twenty-ninth, Guards, First Canadian". General Sir Henry Horne would later dub the division "the pride and wonder of the British Army".[84]

But that was later. Right after Second Ypres some simply said 1st Division had saved the day. Sir John French applauded the division's stand. Sir H. Smith-Dorrien, GOC Second Army, thought that with "less gallant and determined troops the disaster … outside the line they were holding might have been converted into a serious defeat".[85] Perhaps the true significance of the Canadian division's determined stand was this: it denied the Germans the salient.

83 General Sir Ian Hamilton, *The Soul and Body of an Army* (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1921), p. 23.

84 Robert Graves, *Goodbye To All That* (London: The Folio Society, 1981), p. 161; Hugh M. Urquhart, *Arthur Currie: The Biography of a Great Canadian* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1950), p. 156.

85 Brigadier-General J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations France and Belgium, 1915 Winter 1914-15: Battle of Neuve Chapelle: Battle of Ypres* (London: Macmillan, 1927), pp. 251-52.

9

The Death of a Battalion: The 5th King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment at the Second Battle of Ypres

Tom Williams

> Fathers and sons, husbands and brothers, left families, homes, the work and business of their lives almost at an hour's notice to go on active service abroad. It seems to me that we have not realised what these men were asked to do. I sometimes wonder if the eyes of the country will ever be opened to what these Territorials of ours have done.
>
> Field Marshal Sir John French, 1915.[1]

Introduction

The 5th Battalion King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment (TF) (5th KORL) was typical of many of the pre-1914 Territorial battalions, having its origins in the Lancashire Volunteers. In the reorganisation of the Auxiliary forces in 1908, it formed one of the two Territorial battalions of the King's Own Royal Lancaster regiment, with the battalion headquarters in Lancaster and outlying companies in Morecambe, Carnforth and Fleetwood. Drill stations were situated in Blackpool and in the larger villages of the north Fylde area of Lancashire. They were part of the North Lancashire Brigade, West Lancashire Division.

This chapter is the study of a single Territorial battalion, who through the efforts of both the officers and men, was selected for active service in February 1915. Insights into the composition, spirit and experiences of the battalion were found within the regimental and battalion histories, War Diaries, and personal accounts. An especially rich vein lay within the records of contemporary newspapers archived at Lancaster,

1 Quoted in I. F. W. Beckett, *Territorials, A Century of Service,* (Plymouth, DRA publishing, 2008), p.viii.

Blackpool and Fleetwood.[2] Taken as a whole, these sources give, allowing for hyperbole, and some factual inaccuracies, a good understanding of the battalion from its earliest beginnings to the final days of the original Territorials in May 1915.

The 5th KORL was an efficient Territorial infantry battalion whose strength and character came from the quality of its officers and men, a significant number of whom had transferred from the old Volunteer battalions or were early recruits into the TF. There is evidence that from 1908 the battalion, no doubt influenced by the Regular Army staff, was professionally organised under the Regular Adjutant Captain H. V. Rhodes, and that the training was eagerly taken up by the new Territorial soldiers, when around three hundred and fifty men attended a field day.[3]

The commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Lord Richard Cavendish, and his company commanders had all been commissioned from the Volunteers and had served with the TF since its inception. By 1914, the majority of officers had been commissioned between 1908 -1913, followed by an influx of junior officers appointed in late 1914 and early 1915, including four officers appointed from the ranks.

The officers were drawn mostly from the professional and business class and most were keen sportsmen. Captain Bingham, although a medical practitioner, was an infantry company commander and captain of the Vale of Lunesdale cricket club. He had previously played cricket for Derbyshire County. Second Lieutenant Gardner was a keen rugby player, captain of the Vale of Lune Rugby Club and a former player for Preston Grasshoppers. Lieutenant Kirk, who joined the ranks in August 1914 and was commissioned in March 1915, had played football as an amateur centre half for Bradford and Leeds. Others were members of local sporting clubs including two northern archery champions. Second Lieutenant Bates, son of Major Bates the battalion second in command, is believed to be the youngest commissioned officer in the army, gazetted on 10 August 1914 aged 17. Previously he was a member of the Officer Training Corps at the Royal Lancaster Grammar School. The quality of

2 J. M Cowper. *The King's Own, A Story of a Royal Regiment*. Vol. III. (Aldershot, Gale & Polden, 1957). A. Hodgkinson, *The King's Own, 1/5th Battalion, TF in the European War 1914-1918,* (Lancaster, King's Own Regimental Museum: 2005 [1921]; The National Archives (TNA), WO95/2274/3, 1/5th King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment War Diary February – September 1915; TNA WO95/2279 2nd Buffs War Diary, April 1915; TNA WO95/2275, War Diary 1st York and Lancaster Regiment, TNA WO95/2279, 3rd Middlesex Regiment, Nature of Events 22nd April – 3 May 1915; TNA WO95/2267. Report on the operations of the 28th Division to the east of Ypres from 20th April to the 4th May 1915; TNA WO95/2273/3, 83rd Brigade War Diary, May 1915; TNA WO95/2278/4. 85th Infantry Brigade War Diary; TNA WO/2276, Narrative of operations by Colonel Geddes' Staff Officer – H.M.N. Crichton. Sections of Colonel Lord Richard Cavendish's diary are reproduced within the battalion history. Personal accounts are held at King's Own Royal Regiment Museum, Lancaster. The following newspapers are held at the Libraries in Blackpool, Fleetwood and Lancaster; *Blackpool Gazette and Herald*, *Fleetwood Express, Fleetwood Chronicle and Fylde Advertiser*, *Lancaster Guardian.*

3 *Lancaster Guardian*, 25 July 1908, p.8.

Group of 1/5th King's Own Royal Lancaster officers in 1914. Most of the seated front rank are wearing swords. (KO-0439/63)

leadership displayed by all of the officers was to play an important role in maintaining the discipline, morale and resilience of the men.

The battalion recruited from among the larger employers in the area; the mills in Lancaster, the United Alkali Works in Thornton, the fishing industry at Fleetwood and the numerous jobs within the towns and villages of north west Lancashire and the Fylde. Storey Brothers, one of the largest of the Lancaster mills, provided ninety seven men which was sufficient to form one of the eight original companies. They provided a further one hundred and five men for the battalion following the outbreak of war.[4] Unlike many of the Regular Army recruits, these men were generally in full employment and often involved in skilled occupations. It was not unusual for the battalion NCOs to hold supervisory positions in their civilian jobs.

Battalion orders of the time show there were the usual miscreants charged with minor infringements. However as with most other Territorial units there was little need for the imposition of harsh military discipline. The nature of the Territorials, who combined full time employment with part time military service, meant the majority of the men were sufficiently self-disciplined for order to be maintained almost by consent. From the earliest days of the mobilisation there was genuine *esprit de corps* and strong morale that was to survive the hardest ordeals.

The *Lancaster Guardian* newspaper during the years of 1908 -1911 carried regular articles of "Local Military News" which for the most part, were copies of weekly battalion orders signed by the Adjutant, giving notice of the duty officer and NCO,

4 Storey Brothers' Roll of Honour, King's Own Regimental Museum accession no. KO1623/01.

dress code, training and movement orders. Notices of weekend training and the annual camp were posted through these reports. A review of this period shows regular drills of two evenings per week each of two hours, with occasional extra drills being introduced. Additional instructional courses were offered in signalling and cookery. Weekend battalion exercises were organised and held locally in conjunction with the Regular troops of the regiment at the Lancaster depot. The duties for annual camp were organised and delegated in advance and the influence of the Regular Adjutant can be seen in the appointment of brigade and regimental police, orderly room clerks, pioneers, stretcher bearers and cyclists. Musketry range firing was conducted prior to annual camp and both recruits and trained men were reminded to complete their efficiency qualifying shoot before the end of October each year. The annual recruiting intake began in September each year, with recruit instruction starting in October.

Two days after the declaration of war the battalion, practically unanimously, volunteered for overseas service. They were to be one of the early Territorial units to be sent on active service. One of the reasons that allowed them to take their place beside the Regular Army was the spirit and enthusiasm stemming from all ranks. There was a tremendous sense of local pride within the battalion as the men were drawn from individual communities that formed locally based companies. Letters home published in the regional newspapers showed this sense of local patriotism helped support them during training and on active service.[5]

Origins of the Territorial Force

The Territorial Force (TF) was a mass civilian volunteer force that was able to provide around 250,000 officers and men for immediate use by the British Army in August 1914. However, the military efficiency of the TF has been questioned from its inception.[6]

The major criticism of the TF, much as it is now, was that it would never reach the standard of training of the Regular Army or achieve the necessary training and skills to counter an invasion or enemy raid. The TF would never in the eyes of the public, be any more than "Saturday night soldiers".[7] This criticism of the Territorial Force was unjust; they were never intended during peace-time to be capable of meeting a trained army on equal terms or to achieve the levels of efficiency found in the Regular Army. The Territorials were to be kept in partially-trained readiness for their ultimate training only if and when war broke out. The essential part of the training for the TF would only occur once they were mobilised for six months' continuous training.

5 *Fleetwood Chronicle and Fylde Advertiser*, 14 August, p.6, 11, 18 September, p.6, 8. December, p.6. 1914, *Lancaster Guardian* 8 May 1915, p.6.
6 K. W. Mitchinson, *England's Last Hope,* (Basingstoke, Palgrave: 2008), p.1.
7 A. V. Sellwood, *The Saturday Night Soldiers,* (London: White Lion, 1974), p.18.

The primary role of the TF was home defence although individuals had the option to volunteer for overseas "Imperial" service. Richard Burdon Haldane, the Secretary of State for War, anticipated that if the TF was mobilised for war, by the end of their six months training they would volunteer en-masse to expand and support the Regular Army. The aim was to establish a peace-time Force of 250,000 men which in time of war, would hopefully reach 300,000 soldiers.[8] The 5th KORL did not wait for Haldane's six months training period before volunteering for overseas service. An advance party of the 5th KORL was setting up the 1914 annual camp at Kirkby Lonsdale, Lancashire, when they were informed that various items of stores were to be returned immediately to the Ordnance Depot. When the battalion arrived in pouring rain on Sunday 2 August, they found a sodden camp and were merely assigned a blanket as groundsheets were unavailable. Later that evening a warning was received that training would probably be abandoned. By midnight the men were instructed to return to Lancaster and other centres and await further orders. The following day, Monday 3 August, was a Bank Holiday and with no work to report to, many of the men stayed in uniform until the Royal proclamations were posted on Tuesday. At this point most of the battalion reported to their Drill Halls for mobilisation orders.[9]

Training of the Territorial Force.

In maintaining this large peace-time volunteer force Haldane was able to keep military spending to a minimum. Only in the event of war would the nation incur the full cost of providing anything like a trained army. His view was that prolonged peacetime training was not only too expensive, but would lead to conflicts with the military, and the professional, commercial and domestic ties of the men.[10] It was therefore imperative that training should be confined entirely to those elements essential to success in war. Training would suffer proportionately if time was spent on non-essential activities.

The Regulations for the Territorial Force, and for County Associations, 1908 set out the overall system of training for the Territorial Force.[11] The divisional General Officer Commanding–in-Chief held overall responsibility for the training of his command. The chain of responsibility extended downwards to individual company commanders. The Adjutant and Permanent Staff attached to each battalion were employed to provide the initial training of recruits, and to offer assistance in establishing an effective training system. Their presence in no way diminished the full responsibility of every officer for the training and efficiency of the troops under his

8 Parliamentary Debates, Fourth Ser., vol 169 (25 February 1907) cols 1279-345.
9 J. M Cowper. *The King's Own, A Story of a Royal Regiment*. Vol. III. (Aldershot, Gale & Polden, 1957), p.3.
10 E. M. Spiers, *Haldane: An Army Reformer,* p.95.
11 War Office, *Regulations for the Territorial Force, and for County Associations, 1908*. s.271.

command.[12] The effectiveness of the 5th King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment (TF) can be traced to the contributions made by the Regular Army staff, the battalion officers and enthusiasm of the men.

The battalion had been training regularly since 1908 with weekly drill nights, occasional weekends and annual camps. The first annual camp in August 1908 was held at Ramsey, Isle of Man, with 354 men of 5th KORL attending. August Bank holiday week was usually the most suitable for training as the mills and building trades were closed.

During the years 1909 to 1913 the annual training took the form of periods of company and battalion training with extended schemes at brigade or divisional level. The company and battalion training was directed at basic infantry work including night operations and live firing exercises. The larger schemes at brigade and divisional levels were organised as a defence against an advancing enemy force. These "ambitious schemes" proved highly successful.[13] The TF also had the advantage of training on the ground they would be expected to defend in the event of an invasion.

Mobilisation

The public perception of the Territorial's capabilities was expressed from the first moment of mobilisation. As part of the battalion was leaving Blackpool to assemble at Lancaster, it was reported that one wag had remarked that "they would never see any fighting or fire as much as a round of ball cartridge".[14] Once mobilised at Lancaster the battalion was immediately assigned to guarding the shipyards and railway at Barrow in Furness. On 14 August the battalion moved by rail to Didcot, Oxfordshire. Here they were to guard a section of the railway between Swindon and Reading. Despite this new war duty with limited opportunities for training, poor accommodation and a few fatal accidents on the railway, the battalion maintained remarkably high spirits. Three months of their "continuous training for war" passed guarding this section of railway, a task only properly identified following the outbreak of war and one which proved to be a serious distraction from their training.[15] In September a draft of 200 new recruits arrived from Lancaster. The medically unfit and those who had not elected for overseas service returned to Lancaster, leaving the battalion at full strength. The railway guard duties continued until 14 November 1914 when the unit moved to the West Lancashire Divisional concentration area at Sevenoaks, Kent, to finally begin their continuous training.[16]

12 War Office, *Regulations for the Territorial Force, and for County Associations, 1908,* s.271, 277.
13 TNA WO27/508, Report of the Inspector-General of the Forces, Sir J D P French, 21 October 1910.
14 *Fleetwood Chronicle and Fylde Advertiser*, 3 September 1914, p.5.
15 C. Messenger, *Call to Arms: The British Army 1914-18,* (London, Cassell: 2005), p.76.
16 J. M. Cowper, *The King's Own*, pp. 3-6.

Soldiers of the 1/5th King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment strike a bold pose on the Great Western Railway near Didcot. The background structure is probably a temporary guard duty billet. The battalion spent the first four months of the war engaged in the tedious business of railway sentry duty. (KO. Neg/0173)

The systems for individual and collective training in the pre-war Territorial Force were based on the current *Infantry Training* manuals. The 1914 manual, published for the Regular Army on 10 August 1914, was followed by Army Order AO 324, of 21 August 1914, which brought the first New Army into existence and introduced a syllabus of training.[17] On the 1 September 1914, *Training of the Territorial Force* was published. This provided a training program for both Home Defence units and those opting for overseas service. It set out a syllabus for both recruit training and for the trained soldiers of the Yeomanry, Artillery, Engineers, Signal Units and the Infantry.[18] A comparison of the training schemes for both the New Army and the Territorial Force show them to be practically identical.

For the first time there was now a defined course of intense continuous training for the Territorial infantry. The recruits' training, including a musketry course, was to be completed within three months. Trained men, identified by those who had qualified in a recruit's musketry course, had to then repeat specific sections of the recruit's course, plus an additional 20 hours of company and 16 hours of battalion training within

17 P. Simkins, *Kitchener's Army,* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword: 2007[1988]), p.296.
18 Army Orders, dated 1 September 1914. 9/Gen. No. 4118, *Training of the Territorial Force.*

the first month. This was followed by two weeklong periods of company training, battalion training, and a final two weeks of brigade training.[19]

The battalion training plans of 5th KORL were in advance of the guidelines set out in *Training of the Territorial Force*. The officers devoted additional time to company and battalion training. Although the battalion had spent three months engaged in tiresome guard duty, it appeared to have made up for lost time with the intensive training programme during the winter months of 1914-15. Accounts from the soldiers describe the weather during the training at Sevenoaks as "pretty awful" but the men remained in good spirits.[20]

During December 1914 Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Storey, a Mill owner and major employer in Lancaster, visited 'C' Company and presented each man with a muffler and a packet of cigarettes. The battalion was also inspected by General Sir Ian Hamilton, responsible for the mobilisation of the TF, who thought they were a "smart lot of chaps".[21] The battalion became the first in the West Lancashire Division to be considered fit to go abroad. The officers and men had worked hard and the overall military standard of the 5th KORL had greatly improved. This was despite the absence of both time and facilities. For example, rifle practice had been intense, but the musketry course itself had only been completed on the ranges at Shoreham, Sittingbourne and Sandwich during 20–21 January 1915, just three weeks before embarkation.[22]

The old and obsolete personal equipment was gradually replaced early in 1915 and new SMLE rifles, new ammunition and boots were issued in the weeks prior to embarkation. The men were fully equipped and their kit bags packed and labelled. They were issued with one day's rations and were ready to move at a moment's notice.[23] Training continued until the battalion was despatched independently to France. It is difficult to establish if it was the pre-war reputation of the battalion, as was the case with certain 'Class battalions', but it was probably the more tangible enthusiasm and hard work put into the training that had qualified them for overseas service.

Embarkation & Deployment

In pouring rain on Sunday 14 February 1915, the battalion formed up in companies and travelled by train to Southampton. Here they embarked for Le Havre, arriving on Monday morning 15 February. After spending a bitterly cold and wet time camped above Le Havre, the battalion moved by rail very early on 17 February, to Cassel on the

19 Army Orders, dated 1 September 1914. 9/Gen. No. 4118, *Training of the Territorial Force*, pp.11-13.
20 *Lancaster Guardian,* 26 December 1914, p.3.
21 *Lancaster Guardian,* 15 January 1915, p.3.
22 King's Own Royal Regiment Museum, Lancaster. Accession No. KO2320/180-181.
23 *Lancaster Guardian*, 26 December 1914. p.3.

France-Belgium border, travelling with thirty-four men in each truck. This uncomfortable journey of twenty-four hours was followed by a six mile march to billets.[24]

The next morning 19 February 1915, the battalion resumed its high level of efficiency and training by holding a kit and rifle inspection followed by a route march. For the next ten days this was to be a regular pattern, with a route march most days followed by entrenching, battalion drill, and a rapid initiation into elementary trench warfare with practice in occupying and relieving the trenches.[25]

The battalion was moved to Bailleul on 2 March and attached to 14th Brigade, 5th Division. On the 4 March there was a route march for the men while a party consisting of Colonel Cavendish, the adjutant Captain Young, eight officers and ten NCOs attended for trench instruction during the night. The Regular Army officers were most helpful, and did all in their power to initiate the battalion into their strange new life. From 6 March companies were detailed for 24 hour periods of trench instruction at Wulverghem and Neuve Eglise in front of the Messines Ridge. A party of six officers and NCOs received their first instructions in the use of hand and rifle grenades on the 9 March.[26]

Between 11 and 22 March all four companies were rotated through periods of twenty-four consecutive hours in the forward trenches; those out of the line were held in reserve in billets at Dranoutre, about three miles behind the front line. Few were prepared for the nature of the war they faced; trench warfare was completely outside all previous experience. The first trench duties occurred during a period of very cold weather accompanied by sleet and snow. The days could be bright but the nights were "fearfully cold", although the men appreciated that this was but "a slight experience of what their brave comrades had suffered over the winter".[27] To reach the trenches frequently involved a march of an hour and a half, often through deep mud and having to stick to artificial roads made of brushwood. Straying off the path could result in a tumble into in a shell hole full of water. At this time there were no communication trenches between the front and the reserve trenches.

On arrival in the firing line the men discovered that the trenches were ankle deep in mud and water and were frequent targets for German shelling. During the extremely cold nights, the men had only a greatcoat and an oilskin for protection. Exposure became a real problem for some of the soldiers. The feet of the men suffered badly; gum boots were yet to be issued and trench foot was rampant. The march to and from the front line proved agonising for soldiers suffering from wet, aching feet.[28]

24 A. Hodgkinson, *The King's Own, 1/5th Battalion, TF in the European War 1914-1918,* (Lancaster, King's Own Regimental Museum, 2005 [1921]), p.7.
25 *War Diary 1/5th King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment.* (Lancaster: King's Own Royal Regiment Museum, Digital copy. 2007).
26 TNA WO95/2274/3, 1/5th King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment war diary February – September 1915.
27 *Lancaster Guardian,* 27 March 1915, p.8.
28 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History,* p.11.

Captain Eaves and Captain Fawcett enjoying some quiet time in the Kemmel trenches. Both officers came out with the 1/5th Royal Lancasters. Eaves commanded 'C' Company at the outset of war. He would assume battalion command during May and June 1915 when Colonel Cavendish was wounded and Major Bates invalided to Great Britain. (KO-0784/103)

The absence of good communication trenches made movement to and from the trenches particularly dangerous. German snipers were a constant threat and the journey was described by one officer as a "nerve wracking experience, but the men stood it magnificently".[29] Nevertheless, the dangers were very real. The battalion lost five men to sniper fire during movements to and from the trenches. The loss of such good friends and comrades in the early days of active service was felt deeply by all ranks within each company. There were severe lessons to be learned even in the support trenches. In true Lancastrian style the men soon appreciated where the real danger lay –"We have had a taste of German rifle and artillery fire. The rifle fire is not up to much but their artillery don't half give you what for."[30] Another group of men, in an act of defiance, thought it safe to show themselves only to have the Germans respond with a burst of artillery fire. The second shell blew part of the trench away killing eight of the Devonshire regiment who were next to them.[31]

29 *Lancaster Guardian*, 3 April 1915, p.8.
30 *Lancaster Guardian* 20 March 1915, p.5.
31 *Fleetwood Chronicle and Fylde Advertiser,* 13 April 1915, p.5.

The dreadful weather continued throughout March but by this time the men of the battalion had become used to some of the dangers and, having had their first experience of enemy fire, stated that "they were as used to the bullets and shells as they were to the 5.30 buzzer".[32] Having proved that they were steady under fire, their reputation with the Regular troops of the brigade had been enhanced. The 5th KORL confidently considered themselves to be well trained soldiers of the line, equal to the task of facing any troops of the world. Although hardships had been plentiful their one desire now was to "get at the Germans".[33]

Part of their motivation stemmed from the sights and sounds around them The cost of the German invasion was clear. The men of the battalion, many from rural areas were shocked at the destruction of property, particularly the sorrowful sight of burning farms and homeless Belgian women and children. Fields that ought to be prepared for the sowing of grain were trampled into a mud pool by the troops passing to and fro to the firing line.[34]

Following their introduction to the front line trenches, the battalion "rested" for four days, during which time 500 men were assigned to the Royal Engineers for trench digging about twelve miles away. After just five weeks at the front, the battalion who judged it was down to their hard work were assigned to the respected 83rd Brigade, 28th Division.[35] They were now also considered competent to take over a portion of trenches at Wulverghem below the Messines Ridge. The inclusion of two Territorial battalions in a Regular brigade occupying an active sector of the front had broken some of the preconceptions surrounding the force. In 1912 Sir John French claimed it would take at least six months to a year under capable Regular officers before Territorials could take to the field.[36] Yet in early 1915 French, as commander in chief of the British Expeditionary Force, gladly accepted Territorial units such as the 5th KORL under the command of their own officers.

The battalion stayed in the front line until they were relieved by 3rd Monmouthshire Regiment on 31 March. Five days of rest was followed on by a resumption of training with company drill and musketry on 6 April. Maintaining their pre-war zeal for military efficiency, the battalion trained constantly.[37] The men would have need of all their

32 *Lancaster Guardian,* 10 April 1915 p.8.
33 *Fleetwood Chronicle and Fylde Advertiser*, 23 March 1915, p.5.
34 *Lancaster Guardian,* 20 March 1915, p.5.
35 J. M. Cowper, *The King's Own Regimental History,* pp. 47-48. The 83rd Brigade, Under Major-General Bulfin, consisted of; 2nd King's Own Royal Lancaster, 1st York and Lancaster, 1st King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, 2nd East Yorkshire, 3rd Monmouthshire (TF), 1/5th King's Own Royal Lancaster (TF).
36 T. Williams.' The Training of the Territorial Force Infantry 1908-1914 using the 1/5th Battalion the King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment (TF) as an example', (MA Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2013).
37 *War Diary 1/5th King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment.* (Lancaster: King's Own Royal Regiment Museum, Digital copy. 2007).

military skills in the coming weeks, for they were about to experience a true baptism of fire.

April 1915

On 9 April the battalion moved to billets in Ypres. Training was resumed next day. During the night of Monday 12 April the battalion relieved the 3rd Monmouthshire in Polygon Wood at the apex of the Ypres Salient. The trenches, originally constructed by the French, were in a generally poor condition. Colonel Cavendish was decidedly critical, noting that the traverses were badly built, the trenches themselves were poorly drained and most possessed an inadequate parapet which compared unfavourably with the British defences the battalion had previously occupied. The position was further undermined by a serious shortage of trench stores, notably sandbags. A request was made for 3,000 of these essential items, but only 650 were delivered. Small arms ammunition was also in short supply. The battalion spent five days in this maze of poorly made trenches, with the German line in places only ten to fifteen yards away.

The Ypres Salient was a notoriously dangerous zone characterised by incessant shelling, sniping and skirmishing. The apex which the battalion occupied was especially exposed. The continuous German artillery fire caused heavy casualties and made it extremely difficult to evacuate the wounded, with some waiting between ten and thirty hours before it was safe to move them. The battalion suffered severely in what was essentially a defensive role, with fourteen killed or died of wounds, and forty-four wounded. This intense period was described later as "simply hell let loose". It had a profound effect on the men seeing their mates "go down".[38] The "nerves went" on three men; Lieutenant George, the Medical Officer feared two of them may have been left "permanently mad".[39] After being relieved on 17 April, the battalion returned to billets in the Lunatic Asylum at Ypres.

The Second Battle of Ypres: Gravenstafel

During the night of 20 April, all troops of the 28th Division billeted in the town of Ypres were ordered out to previously arranged bivouac positions around St. Jean, to escape increased shelling.[40]

The 22 April was a glorious spring day; it had been rather quiet in the trenches although the Frezenberg ridge and the area around Zonnebeke had been continually shelled. The weather conditions had been good and the ground was hard and dry

38 *Lancaster Guardian,* 24 April 1915, p.5.
39 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History,* p.11.
40 TNA WO95/2267. Report on the operations of the 28th Division to the east of Ypres from 20th April to the 4th May 1915.

Shrapnel bursting near Zonnebeke. The trenches in these early days were rudimentary breastwork positions constructed of sandbags and timber. The trees are still standing and in leaf. The soldier in the lower right has a 1/5th King's Own brass shoulder title. (KO-0784/047)

A group of soldiers pose for the camera in the same trench. It must be assumed the shelling had ceased, as there appears to be little protection from shrapnel bursts. (KO-0784/050)

allowing movement almost anywhere across country. The wind was blowing straight from the north.[41]

During the morning the town and roads leading into Ypres were violently bombarded by heavy howitzers; this eventually ceased during the afternoon but around 5.00 pm the enemy shelling recommenced. The villages in front of Ypres, which until now had remained untouched, were also pounded. Heavy artillery fire was heard coming from the French positions to the north. This was the opening of the German gas attack on the French lines near Langemarck, north of Ypres. The gas moved downwind from the north, but it was the intense rifle and machine gun fire that first alerted the British to the seriousness of the situation. It was soon apparent that something was seriously wrong as small arms fire could be heard within 1,000 yards of St. Jean and bullets were hitting the village.[42]

The German gas attack on the French lines between Poelcappelle to the north east of Ypres and Steenstraat in the north west had ripped an approximately four mile wide gap in the Allied line. For many hours there were no substantial forces left between the Germans and Ypres itself. In the confusion the 1st Canadian Division, holding the left of the British line, was able to form a flank defence, thereby denying the Germans the possibility of rolling up the whole of the British position. However, it was imperative that a line was established between the Canadian left and the French right flank to plug the dangerous gap.

Local reserves from the 27th and 28th Divisions were put on alert and all reliefs cancelled. The 3rd Middlesex, under the initiative of their commanding officer Colonel Stephenson, moved forward around 6.45 pm to dig a line of trenches facing north and north east about three hundred yards north of St. Jean. Colonel Geddes, commanding officer of 2nd Buffs, moved his battalion up, on the right of the Middlesex, astride the Ypres-Poelcappelle road. The 5th KORL were held in reserve south of St. Jean and although this front was nearly two miles behind the original French front line, Sergeant A Price still felt the effects of the gas: "we got a fair dose of the gas, nearly choking one and making one's eyes feel bad."[43]

The fighting in this period was immensely complex and it is necessary to provide an outline of the movements of the British and Canadian forces in the opening days of the battle. However, it must be remembered that this was period of tremendous confusion. The situation was unclear, movements were made in darkness over unfamiliar ground and, as will be seen, communications were haphazard at best. Kenneth Radley's chapter, elsewhere in this volume, details the experience of 1st Canadian Division in this same action; the passage that follows is primarily concerned with the movements of the 5th KORL and other British battalions.

41 TNA WO95/2278/4. 85th Infantry Brigade War Diary.
42 TNA WO95/2279 2nd Buffs War Diary, April 1915.
43 *Lancaster Guardian*, 8 May 1915, p.6.

The Canadians by this time had extended to their left in an attempt to make contact with the few remaining French forces east of the Yser Canal. To the right of the Canadians was the 85th Brigade, with their Headquarters (HQ) at Verlorenhoek, who issued orders for patrols to be sent out from St. Jean to establish the extent of the gap in the French front. Colonel Geddes was similarly ordered to patrol to his front. At 8.30 pm contact was made with the 2nd Canadian Brigade on the right of the gap.[44]

At 12.30 am on the 23 April all troops in the St. Jean area were put at the disposal of General Alderson of the 1st Canadian Division, who then placed them under the command of the most senior officer present, Colonel Geddes of the 2nd Buffs. The four battalions in the immediate area – 2nd Buffs, 1st York & Lancaster, 5th KORL and 3rd Middlesex – became an ad-hoc brigade known as "Geddes' Detachment". Colonel Geddes was ordered to deploy his troops in positions north of the Ypres-Poelcappelle road, with two companies of the 3rd Middlesex having been sent at 9.30pm to secure the pontoon bridge over the Yser Canal, a mile and half north of Ypres. The 3rd Canadian Brigade at St. Julien made a request about this time for assistance and Colonel Geddes despatched 'B' Company of the 2nd Buffs. By 1.00 am it was reported to be "all quiet" along the exposed front. Officer's patrols to the north of St. Jean reported no sign of the enemy.[45]

Colonel Geddes was assigned a single Staff officer, Captain Crichton, who had just reported to Divisional HQ as Brigade Major, 84th Infantry Brigade; he arrived at 1.30 am, followed by a platoon of the Divisional Cyclist Company and a signal section. This was to be Colonel Geddes entire staff for a force the size of a brigade. The 2nd East Yorkshire was now also placed at the disposal of the Canadian Division.[46]

At 1.50am General Alderson instructed Colonel Geddes to try to close the gap in the line by linking up on the right with the Canadians, while extending his left to make contact with the French, and to drive back any enemy that may have penetrated through the gaps. If this was not possible he was to dig-in.[47]

At 3.30 am Colonel Geddes ordered the 2nd Buffs, less the company sent to St. Julien, to move through Wieltje and then in a northerly direction and gain touch with the left flank of the 3rd Canadian Brigade. It was after 4.00 am and thus in broad daylight when the 2nd Buffs was collected and moved off. About 800 yards north of Wieltje they came across trenches occupied by Canadians.

At 3.30 am the 3rd Middlesex, less the two companies sent to secure the pontoon bridges over the canal, moved about 1000 yards north west of St. Jean, taking the line to the canal bank with orders to make contact with the French right, then deploy to

44 TNA WO95/2278. 85th Brigade War Diary, 22-28 April 1915.
45 TNA WO95/2278. 85th Brigade War Diary, 22-28 April 1915.
46 TNA WO95/2267. Report on the operations of the 28th Division to the east of Ypres from 20th April to 4th May 1915.
47 J. E. Edmonds, *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium 1915,* (London, Macmillan;1927), p.181. [Hereafter *Official History*]

their right and attempt to gain touch with 2nd Buffs. At 4.00 am 5th KORL moved about a mile north of St. Jean in the direction of Pilckem and dug- in near the cross roads between La Belle Alliance Farm and Hill Top Farm. The men were able to excavate small individual trenches or scrapes using their entrenching tools, this was their only protection against rifle fire.[48]

The 3rd Middlesex, who had made contact with the 1st and 4th Battalions of the 1st Canadian Brigade, then extended to their right and made contact with the 5th KORL at the centre. The 3rd Middlesex found no trace of the French right or the 2nd Buffs. Their attempts to push forward onto Mauser Ridge were met by heavy enemy fire. Owing to a signal mistake, the 5th KORL received and acted upon a message intended for the 1st York & Lancs to move right, nearer to Wieltje, thus temporarily leaving a gap in the middle of the line. The enemy however, made no attempt to take advantage of this. The battalion again set to digging-in. The 5th KORL then received orders to return to their correct position at the centre and in spite of heavy shellfire, moved back again with such skill and steadiness that their casualties were only light.[49]

The 1st York and Lancaster had left Ypres at 1.15 am on 23 April and were directed to trenches north west of Wieltje where they would be in a position to assist the hard pressed Canadians who were defending Kitchener's Wood. During this move they were exposed to severe shelling and suffered a few casualties.[50]

In support of an expected French attack at 5.25 am, the 1st and 4th Canadian battalions, along with the 3rd Middlesex, advanced towards Mauser Ridge reaching Turco Farm three hundred yards in front of the German lines before being forced to withdraw under heavy rifle fire, finally digging in six hundred yards from the enemy positions at 9.00 am. The attack by the French never materialised. The Canadians and 3rd Middlesex remained in this position being shelled and exposed to tear gas all day.[51]

The 5th KORL positions on Hill Top Ridge were under constant artillery fire, as well as being exposed to gas fumes which caused irritation to the eyes. From here they witnessed the gallant attempt by the Canadians and the 3rd Middlesex to advance on Mauser Ridge. Captain Fawcett, who was later on leave when a report in a local newspaper appeared from "'a British officer's story of the 5th KORL", stated that "for two days the 5th King's Own stood between the Germans and Ypres."[52] The battalion officers had realised there were no other troops between them and the Germans on Mauser Ridge.[53]

48 TNA WO95/2274, 1/5th King's Own Royal Lancaster War Diary.
49 TNA WO/2276, Narrative of operations by Colonel Geddes' Staff Officer – H.M.N. Crichton.
50 TNA WO95/2275, War Diary 1st York and Lancaster Regiment.
51 G. W. L. Nicholson, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War. Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919,* (Ottawa: Queens Printer, 1952), p.68. [Hereafter *Official Canadian History*]
52 *Fleetwood Chronicle and Fylde Advertiser*, 25 May 1915, p.5.
53 *Fleetwood Chronicle and Fylde Advertiser,* 25 May 1915, p.5. A 5th Battalion Officer's Account.

Other ranks of 1/5th King's Own Royal Lancaster relaxing in the Zonnebeke trenches. Note the variety of soft headgear. Such diversity in uniforms and equipment was symptomatic of the BEF as a whole throughout 1915. (KO-0784-049)

General Foch was determined that the French 45th and 87th Divisions should recover the ground lost during the German assault on the 22 April, and regardless of the lack of reinforcements and insufficient artillery, General Putz was ordered to prepare a counter-attack for 3.00 pm on 23 April. Sir John French agreed to cooperate with the French. General Smith-Dorrien, commander of Second Army and Lieutenant General Plumer, commanding V Corps, agreed that if an attack was to be made it should take place as soon as possible, as the French appeared to be doing little and the Germans were making use of the inactivity to strengthen their positions.[54]

On 23 April, St. George's day, orders were issued by Second Army at 2.40 pm for an attack at 3.00 pm along a line extending from Kitchener's Wood to the Yser Canal, directed towards Pilckem. The French 45th and 87th Divisions were to advance on the left of the Ypres-Pilckem road with the British forces to the right of the road. In order to allow the 13th Brigade, who had been travelling on foot all night, to reach its start position and to eat a meal before advancing, the attack was later postponed until 4.15 pm.[55]

54 *Official History*. p.203.
55 *Official Canadian History*, p.68.

The artillery however, was not informed of the postponement and commenced the preliminary bombardment at 2.45 pm. With ammunition in short supply there was to be no further preliminary fire, although some limited artillery support was provided when the attack began.

At 4.10 pm the 5th KORL was still in position on Hill Top Ridge when the following order was received from Col. Geddes.

> Following has been sent to EAST YORK and YORK and LANCSAS. Begins
> The 13th Brigade crosses by the pontoon bridge at 3 pm and advances to the attack at 3.45 pm with the right on the PILKEM-YPRES road.
> First objective PILKEM.
> O.C EAST YORKS will send an officer at once to report to Gen O'Gowan at pontoon bridge C.19.c.
> EAST YORKS and YORK and LANCSR will co-operate this attack EAST of the PILKEM-YPRES road, EAST YORKS with left on that road, and maintaining touch with 13th BRIGADE and YORK and LANCSR will move on the right of EAST YORKS.
> Two battalions of the 27th Division will cooperate in the attack on the right of the YORK and LANCSR.
> BUFFS and 3rd MIDDLESEX will hold their present line 5th KINGS OWN ROYAL LANCASTER, less 1 Company, will follow the attack in reserve moving with its left on the PILKEM-YPRES road.
> Each battalion will move on a front of five hundred yards.
> HQ will remain for the present at WIELTJE where reports should be sent.
> Colonel Geddes. 3.35 pm[56]

Colonel Cavendish had been given only the vaguest outlines of the objective and direction of attack. There had been no opportunity for officers to reconnoitre the ground or establish the position of the enemy. As the order had arrived so late the battalion hurriedly formed up and moved off at 5.00 pm, following two Regular battalions – the 2nd East Yorkshire and 1st York and Lancaster. There was about a mile of open ground sloping down from Hill Top then gently rising up to the enemy positions on Mauser Ridge. It was a crystal clear afternoon making every man distinctly visible to the hidden Germans. Major Bates led off with 'C' company, the battalion advancing in half companies of 5-6 lines, in short rushes at wide intervals. Later accounts describe the company commanders calling to fix bayonets and prepare to charge, "we got word that the Germans had to be shifted and we were told to load up, fix bayonets and charge them. We had no cover and it was all open land".[57] German artillery brought effective fire down on the advancing troops causing

56 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History,* p.13.
57 *Lancaster Guardian,* 1 May 1915 p.8.

casualties from the outset. Captain Atkinson followed next with 'A' company, then Captain Sharpe with 'B' company; the latter had only gone ten yards before he was wounded. Colonel Cavendish went forward with Captain Carter and 'D' company. The advance was carried out in perfect order, Colonel Cavendish leading his men bravely through the terrible fire, with every man pushing forward. As the 5th KORL came into line with the leading troops a gap developed in front between the 2nd Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (DCLI) and the 2nd East Yorks, drawing the battalion into the front line. Sergeant L. Titchener later recalled, "Our battalion was the last to charge and I was proud of the boys, They advanced like heroes every one of them."[58] The Territorials were now under intense high explosive, shrapnel, machine-gun and rifle fire. "There were Canadians and regulars with us and they didn't half cheer us at the way we advanced."[59] For six hundred yards the advance was according to Colonel Cavendish "simply damnable, a wonder anyone got through". The leading elements lost direction and were flayed by enfilade fire as a result. A large deep ditch, previously excavated and occupied by the 3rd Middlesex, added to the delay and caused disruption to the order of the companies.[60] Major Bates later recalled; "I pray to god that I will never see such an awful sight again my heart is sad and aches for those dear ones we left behind".[61]

A few of the attacking troops reached the farm buildings in front of the main enemy positions. Second Lieutenant Owtram led his platoon and briefly occupied one of these buildings before being wounded and driven back. Despite persistent efforts the battalion was unable to reach the enemy line. The Germans had excellent fields of fire that ensured most British troops were stopped two to three hundred yards away. Without artillery support to suppress the defenders the task was ultimately hopeless; casualties spiralled and eventually there were too few men left to rush the enemy line. A halt was finally called and survivors sought whatever cover they could find. Colonel Cavendish recorded the sight in his diary, "In one field men sheltered behind heaps of manure with the result that there was hardly a heap that did not have a dead or wounded man beside it".[62]

The survivors recalled the fate of their comrades as they attempted to advance:

> The Captain called to fix bayonets and charge. I felt awfully frightened but off we went with full packs on our backs, including blankets. I didn't half go each time we were told to advance and when stopped got as flat as a fluke. I saw a sight I never want to see again – farms on fire and the town behind us where we had been billeted on fire.

58 *Fleetwood Chronicle and Fylde Advertiser*, 30 April 1915, p.5.
59 *Lancaster Guardian*, 8 May 1915, p.6.
60 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History,* p.15.
61 *Lancaster Guardian*, 8 May 1915, p.6.
62 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History* p.15. Cowper, p.55.

Another man observed:

> The battalion have fairly got cut up. It brought tears to my eyes as I lay and saw them dropping. Talk about a battlefield, it was one. They were lying dead all over the shop. We had no cover and it was all open land. The shells did for most of them.[63]

The battalion eventually reached a ditch that had earlier been improved by the Canadians to serve as an improvised trench; a few remained there along with the remnants of the 3rd Middlesex. Captain Carter was killed here, shot in the head as his company reached the ditch. Colonel Cavendish supposed that the battalion should have gone on further but by this time the 2nd East Yorkshire, on their left, had ceased to exist. The Territorials had lost both guns and nine men of the machine-gun section. The main attacking force had by now been reduced to a jumble of men clustered around a handful of officers and, as it was uncertain which part of the line was to be attacked, it was decided to that they should remain where they were until dusk.[64]

As darkness fell around 9.30 pm, Colonel Cavendish decided to fall back one to two hundred yards and dig a new line. This was completed by 'A' company and a platoon of 'D' company while the remainder of the battalion retired further back to Hill Top Ridge and again dug-in. Colonel Cavendish sought instructions from Colonel Geddes at his headquarters. He was instructed to keep the battalion in its present positions, which were to be strengthened to form a support line along Hill Top Ridge. The battalion remained there under constant shellfire for the next two days, during which time the supply of rations and ammunition failed; as a result for a day and a night, the 5th KORL sustained themselves on food from the haversacks of dead Canadians. Fortunately the Germans did not take advantage of the weakened state the British line and the night of 23-24 April passed fairly quietly.[65]

The bloody advance of Colonel Geddes' Detachment and the actions of 1st Canadian Brigade had not been in vain. The British and Canadians had managed to form a virtually continuous line from south of Kitchener's Wood to Hampshire Farm, and then west along the forward edge of the depression in front of Mauser Ridge via Turco Farm to within 1,200 yards of the Yser Canal.

During the afternoon of 24 April the remnants of Colonel Geddes' Detachment were advised they would be relieved by 10th Infantry Brigade. This order was later cancelled and all units along the front warned to maintain their positions at all costs. The shelling continued throughout the evening and into the night but casualties were light and no real attack was pushed home against the thin defensive line. One and half companies of the 5th KORL remained in the uncomfortable and hastily constructed

63 *Lancaster Guardian*, 8 May 1915 p.6.
64 TNA WO95/2274. 1/5th King's Own War Diary, April and May 1915.
65 *Official History*, p.206.

defences on Hill Top Ridge about 500 yards from the German lines. The remainder of the battalion were back in the original line in front of St. Jean, which was now being strengthened.[66]

The battalion had suffered on 24 April. It had lost seven officers, one killed, two died of wounds, and four wounded, as well as 122 other ranks, twenty-three of whom were killed or died of wounds.[67] The loss of so many friends and comrades affected the men in different ways. Lance Corporal Bratherton thanked God "that some of us had survived to tell the tale, it was lucky all of us were not wiped out" whilst another man could not bring himself to describe it merely saying: "I shall tell you nothing of this great battle for tongues can't tell and people won't believe".[68]

At 2.30 am on Sunday 25 April a message was received that 10th Brigade was to attack St. Julien and Kitchener's Wood at 4.30 am and 5th KORL were to be ready to support and cooperate in exploiting any success. The attack was preceded by a fierce artillery bombardment supported by newly arrived heavy guns. However, the assault proved unsuccessful and the battalion was not called upon for assistance. A lull followed, and at midday the battalion transport section eventually managed to deliver the much needed rations and supplies.[69]

The battalion was eventually relieved by the 2nd King's Own Scottish Borderers about 2.00 am on Monday 26 April. The men marched to Potijze Wood where they were to act as a reserve for a new brigade formed under Colonel Newcombe of the 2nd DCLI. Any hopes of immediate rest were dashed, as within six hours of arrival the battalion received orders to stand-to, where they remained ready to move at a moment's notice throughout the day.[70]

Reconnaissance on 26 April showed that the Germans had consolidated their new positions and while British reinforcements on the ground were adequate to hold back any enemy advance, the time for immediate local counter-attacks had passed. Only a carefully planned assault involving days of preparation would now have any chance of success.

Late on 27 April the 5th KORL, with 2nd DCLI, 1st York & Lancaster and 2nd Duke of Wellington's were formed into yet another improvised brigade under Lt. Col. H. D. Tuson of the 2nd DCLI. They were instructed to support an attack by the Lahore Division that aimed to drive the German line on the north of the salient back to its original position. While the battalion was assembling to support the attack they came under shell fire resulting in several casualties. Sadly, the attack by the Indians on the 28 April proved unsuccessful, as again without French assistance, careful planning and more artillery, progress was simply impossible.

66 J. M. Cowper, *King's Own Regimental History*, p.186.
67 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History* p.16.
68 *Lancaster Guardian*, 8 May 1915, p.6.
69 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History*, p. 16.
70 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History* p.16.

The only course now was to withdraw from the most exposed parts of the salient. When the line in the north was consolidated on the night of 28-29 April, the units of Tuson's brigade were returned to their own formations. The 5th KORL marched west of Ypres to 83rd Brigade rest huts at Vlamertinghe and on the next day the battalion was personally congratulated for their fine performance on 23 April by Lieutenant General Plumer, who was by now commanding all the troops in the salient.[71]

During the 29–30 April the battalion rested at the huts in Vlamertinghe. The effective strength of the battalion had been reduced to 540 men; they had lost 380 of the original 1,020 soldiers that had left England.

However, Friday 30 April was a glorious, hot sunny day and Colonel Cavendish gladly recorded in his diary "twenty-four hours of rest had a wonderful effect on myself and the men. After visiting the lines I am more than pleased with their appearance, health and spirit."[72] It says something of the resilience and morale of these men that a rugby match was organised that evening against a combined team of the 2nd East Yorkshire and 1st York and Lancaster. The 5th KORL beat them 21–0.[73]

Analysis

When the Germans launched their gas attack on 22 April 1915 the British front line was held by ten and a half battalions, with a further seven in the second line supported by the artillery of half a division. They faced forty-two German battalions with five times the artillery firepower and a distinct advantage in heavy guns. The counter moves made during the early morning of 23 April with troops probing the positions at the limit of the enemy advance, showed the gap was being closed, but without adequate artillery support there was little hope of advancing in daylight over open ground to drive the Germans from their defensive positions. Nevertheless, the desperate counterattacks during the 22-23 April and the firm resistance to further enemy attacks had prevented the Germans from advancing much further.[74] The "open door" to Ypres and beyond had now been gently closed.

Could the situation have been dealt with any differently? The *Official History* is uncompromising on the expectations of the counter-attack of 23 April ever succeeding: "The attack to which the Second army was committed by GHQ at the request of the French never had any prospect of success." It continues; "The attack had been a magnificent display of discipline and courage that stopped the enemy's advance but the price paid had been very heavy with no ground gained that could not have been secured, probably with minimal casualties, by a simple advance after dark".[75]

71 J. M. Cowper, *King's Own Regimental History*, p.57.
72 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History*, p. 18.
73 Ibid., p. 18.
74 *Official History*, pp.198-99.
75 *Official History,* p.207.

By the time Brigadier General J.E. Edmonds wrote the history of this action he concluded that the Germans had completed what was to be known later as a classic 'limited objective' operation, achievable only when the attacker is superior in heavy artillery. Edmonds was writing with the distinct advantage of hindsight, together with the knowledge that the German High Command's 'limited objectives' on the 23 April did not include an assault on Ypres.[76] This was by no means clear during the battle itself and choices had to be made by the 'man on the spot' in conditions of utmost confusion.

However, much of the decision making in April 1915 was made by French rather than British commanders. General Foch was determined that the French should recapture the ground they had lost and expected full cooperation from the British. But whilst General Foch repeatedly ordered immediate counter-attacks, the local commander General Putz, did not have the guns or men to execute his plans. As has been seen, the repeated failure of French forces to materialize at agreed times doomed British counterattacks, but Sir John French in his desire to preserve the "unity of command whenever possible" found himself bound to cooperate with Foch's wishes and so his own assaults went ahead regardless. When studying the desperate fighting at Second Ypres there is a sense of deference to the French pre-war doctrine of the offensive on all occasions and in all situations. As a result, local commanders be they French or British, were ordered to recover the lost ground by infantry attack with severely limited artillery support.[77]

The *Official History* is again severely critical of these hasty and inevitably ill-organised counter-attacks that resulted in enormous casualties. The British attempts to carry out their obligations by means of offensive action were, in Edmonds's opinion, neither true counter-attacks that took advantage of a fluid battle situation, nor deliberately planned attacks backed by sound preparations. As a result the assaults were costly and did nothing to restore the situation. The only positive result of these efforts was making the enemy pause and place more reliance on his artillery.[78] The Germans were attempting to employ a new tactic where the infantry were only expected to occupy the ground once the guns had removed all opposition.[79]

Edmonds perceived that new infantry require a greater proportion of, and better artillery, than seasoned troops. He pointed out that there was little in the way of support for the "hastily trained infantry" at Ypres except ancient and obsolete weapons of the South African War.[80] However, he failed to identify the "hastily trained" troops. Do we assume he is referring to the Canadians and the Territorials or the draft replacements of the Regular units? Whoever they were, they had performed no

76 G. H. Cassar, *Hell in Flanders Fields,* (Toronto, Dundurn Press, 2010), p.170.
77 *Official History*. pp.3, 299.
78 *Official History,* p.211.
79 Ibid., pp.356-57.
80 Ibid., p.211.

worse and in many ways as well as, their Regular counterparts and more importantly, the enemy. What they were is of lesser significance than what they did.[81]

How did the 5th King's Own perform?

In 1912, Major General Sir E. C. Bethune expressed his faith in the Territorial Force, stating that in his experience the TF, once mobilised and under their own officers for continuous training, would improve quicker than critics imagined. If the performance of the 5th KORL at Second Ypres can be considered typical of the Territorial battalions at this stage of the war then Bethune's earlier faith was fully warranted.[82]

The major advantage possessed by the 5th KORL was that most of the battalion had trained under their own officers before the war and after mobilisation. Unlike the New Armies, the officers, NCOs and men of the battalion were known to each other engendering a strong *esprit de corps*. Their first action was remarkably similar to a number of the pre-war annual camp training schemes, held at brigade and divisional level, directed towards repelling an enemy attack then following up with a counter-attack. Ironically such large scale training schemes had at the time been discouraged by the Inspector General of the Forces, Sir John French.[83]

Nevertheless, despite their credible performance in action, the confusion of battle and the lack of proper preparation grated on the professionally minded officers of the 5th KORL. Colonel Richard Cavendish recorded his views on the events of late April 1915. He noted bitterly that the attack on 23 April was badly planned or "rather there was no plan at all". "No details had been given and there was not the slightest knowledge of the ground or position of the German trenches". On the 25 April he expressed his concerns "that our line was very thinly held and if the Germans had come along they could easily have got through", but he concluded that the actions of Geddes' Detachment may have had the effect of preventing the Germans attacking and pushing on to Ypres.[84]

Colonel Cavendish was, as would be expected, full of praise for his battalion. The company commanders reported that their men "went forward well, continually meeting a stream of wounded going to the rear and the ground littered with dead".[85] During the advance on 23 April, the 5th KORL watched the Regular troops ahead

81 K. Radley, *Get Tough Stay Tough–shaping the Canadian Corps 1914–1918,* (Solihull, Helion; 2014), p. xvii.

82 TNA WO32/9192, 2 July 1912. Minute 8. To G.M from General Bethune D.G.T.F, attached to the minute papers of the 'Reports of the General Officers Commanding-in-Chief as to the relative value of Territorial Troops as compared with corresponding units and formations of the Regular Army'.

83 TNA WO27/508, Report of the Inspector-General of the Forces, Sir J D P French, 21 October 1910.

84 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History*, pp.15-17.

85 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History*, p.15.

come under devastating artillery, machine-gun and rifle fire without faltering. When the order came for the battalion to prepare to advance one of the Territorials later recorded, "it was a tickler for us after watching others die but our boys stuck it … never did their pace falter unless caused by a bullet". Such accounts give testament to the discipline and courage of this untried Territorial unit.[86]

It must also be remembered that the battalion was far from fresh. The men had had almost no sleep since they left their billets on 20 April and, for twenty-four hours prior to the attack, they had gone without rations. That they carried out their attack with such élan suggests a very high level of morale and discipline. Colonel Cavendish recorded his praise: "The men are wonderfully good at the way they go on … They are cheerful; the only thing we think about is whether we are going to get enough to eat".[87]

Local newspapers in the battalion's home districts, unlike the national newspapers, included the fates of many soldiers and comrades and stressed the huge losses suffered by the battalion. They published many letters and accounts from survivors of this, their first action. The accounts are full of praise for their comrades in other regiments; the Canadians and the York & Lancaster and East Yorkshire battalions, who had charged through that "open hell of fire". They also record the battalion's "awful" advance and the enormous casualties. As would be expected, there is considerable variation in the accounts regarding the timing and direction of the attack and which units they were following. In a number of accounts the author assumed that they were repelling a German attack. There were claims that many a Victoria Cross would have been won that day if only the officers had survived. The men thought it distinctly strange that they were attacking in daylight, and some realised that "if we had not driven them back, they would have broken through and it would have all been up. We caught them just in time."[88] It was only later explained to them by the Adjutant, that the German advance had to be checked at that moment.[89] They were particularly proud to have been acknowledged by a Regular battalion; the 1st York & Lancaster, as being "fit to be called a first line corps".[90]

This first action of 5th KORL was but a prelude to a further two weeks of heavy defensive fighting as the Second Battle of Ypres raged on.

86 *Fleetwood Chronicle and Fylde Advertiser*, Letter from a 'Territorial at the Front', 14 May 1915, p.8.
87 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History*, pp.15-17.
88 *Lancaster Guardian,* 8 May 1915, p.6.
89 *Lancaster Guardian,* 8 May 1915, p.5. FCFCA, 30 April, p.8. *Fleetwood Chronicle and Fylde Advertiser*, 4 June 1915, p.8.
90 *Fleetwood Chronicle and Fylde Advertiser*, 4-28 May 1915.

May 1915

1 May 1915 dawned with the battalion in reserve and enjoying a relatively quiet time despite the persistent German artillery fire on the roads that lay on either side of the camp. Another rugby match was played with shells bursting two hundred yards away; this time the 5th KORL scraped a 9–8 victory over 2nd East Yorkshire. However, later that day a warning arrived that the battalion would soon move back to the trenches at Polygon Wood. Colonel Cavendish records that he was looking forward to a change, as he understood it was quiet down there. He considered the top of the Salient an unlikely place for the Germans to try and breakthrough and a "still more unlikely place for us to attack them".[91] His optimism was premature.

The weather was stifling on 2 May when orders were received at 5.30 pm to move to the trenches as soon as possible. During the night of 2 -3 May the battalion made their way by a circuitous route around Ypres to avoid the heavy shelling. After leaving Potijze, on the Ypres-Zonnebeke road, the battalion passed through the General Headquarters (GHQ) Line. This was a series of redoubts built by the French, four to five hundred yards apart. Each structure was about thirty yards in length with its flanks turned back, surrounded by a belt of wire six yards deep. They had excellent fields of fire and were connected by fire trenches. Each held a garrison of fifty men. The right of this line was on Zillebeke Lake and the left joined the new defences north of Wieltje.

The battalion collected ammunition and various stores from their old trenches and took them along to the new line, probably in anticipation of the old positions being evacuated. To the dismay of the officers the new position, about two miles behind the front, east of Frezenberg and close to the Ypres-Zonnebeke road, was pitifully weak. The trenches were narrow and half finished with poor communication lines. Worse still, they were located on the forward slopes of the Frezenberg ridge, overlooked by the Germans on the Zonnebeke and Gravenstafel ridges. There were no shelters, telephones or wire entanglements. Colonel Cavendish reflected at the time, "I do not know why we are here. It looks uncommonly like a general retirement. I don't like this spot at all". By 11.00 am they had already been shelled continuously for five hours.[92]

At 9.45 pm on 2 May, Plumer directed that the various movements he had set in place for the retirement should now be executed. The moves all went according to plan and the reserves withdrew across the Yser Canal. It only remained to bring back the infantry of the 4th, 27th and 28th Divisions to the new line, part of which was now held by the 5th KORL at Frezenberg. On the 3 May at 11.45 am Plumer issued orders to complete the withdrawal. The new line extended left from near Hill 60 ran through Sanctuary Wood, then in front of Hooge, Frezenberg, Mouse Trap Farm and on to Turco Farm where it met the French line, an average retirement of about 4000 yards.

91 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History*, p. 18.
92 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History*, p. 18.

Soon after Plumer's orders had been issued the Germans commenced a heavy artillery bombardment, putting pressure on the junction between 11th and 85th Brigades at Berlin Wood, just over a mile north of Zonnebeke. At 3.00 pm this was followed up with an infantry attack. Initial reinforcements were rushed up from the 1st York and Lancaster and the 5th KORL.

The 5th KORL sent up 'C' company during the morning of 3 May to support the Rifle Brigade on the left of the road, and at 3.00 pm 'B' company was deployed in support along with the 2nd East Yorkshire and 1st York and Lancaster. Both companies stayed until they could withdraw after dark, and returned having sustained only limited casualties. Eventually the fighting in the Salient died down about 9.00 pm. It was decided to proceed as planned with the general withdrawal under the cover of darkness. The retreat to the new line, aided by a ground mist, was completed successfully by early morning on 4 May. Plumer now ordered the construction of a second line, with a row of strong points in the rear along the GHQ Line and a third line along the ramparts of Ypres. With the exception of two batteries, all British artillery was now west of the canal.[93]

Once the Germans had discovered that the front trenches had been evacuated, their infantry probed forward and field guns were brought up. It did not take them long to discover the exposed positions on the forward slopes of Frezenberg ridge. The trenches held by the 5th KORL, although totally inadequate, now formed the front line on the left of the 83rd Brigade sector. The Germans immediately identified the weakness of the line and the position was battered by continuous shellfire for sixteen hours. At dusk Colonel Cavendish visited the brigadier to explain that his battalion was exhausted and too weak to hold the forward trenches. He was informed that unfortunately there were no other troops available. Colonel Cavendish wearily recorded in his diary, "The men are very good, although many of them were very much shaken. It was the longest day, I think, I ever spent."[94]

The 5 May proved to be an even worse day. Beginning at dawn, the battalion trenches came under ferocious bombardment, and under cover of their artillery the German infantry advanced and dug themselves in 800 to 1,000 yards in front of British line. The Germans then launched a determined attack on the 83rd Brigade positions astride the Ypres-Zonnebeke road at Frezenberg. Although the assault was driven back, the enemy artillery kept up its fire. By evening the battalion had suffered two hundred casualties and with so little shelter it proved impossible to get the wounded under cover. One officer, Second Lieutenant Gardner was killed and of eight new officers that had arrived the previous night, three were wounded. After strong representations by Colonel Cavendish, the 2nd KORL were recalled, after less than twenty-four hours out of the line, to relieve the bloodied battalion. The 2nd Battalion arrived about 9.30 pm and the relief was completed by 11.00 pm. The 5th

93 *Official History*, pp.293-295, 302.
94 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History*, p.19.

KORL made its way back during the night of 6-7 May to the huts at Vlamertinghe for some well-deserved respite.[95]

Their rest was short lived. That evening 7 May, the battalion was ordered to move after dark to reserve positions in dug outs just south of St. Jean. The effective strength of the battalion was now only 398 officers and men. Over one hundred of these men had attended sick parade that morning but the Medical Officer confirmed that they were all genuine cases. Colonel Cavendish found it impossible to exaggerate the unselfishness and courage of the men who remained so cheerful. The strain should not be underestimated. Cavendish himself revealed something of his own mental state when he recorded that day:"I know absolutely nothing of what is going on, and strangely, do not care."[96]

Under cover of darkness on the evening of 7 May the 5th KORL moved to fields just south of St. Jean, and then around 1.00 am on the 8 May, along with the 2nd East Yorkshire, they were directed into reserve trenches on the GHQ Line on the Ypres-Zonnebeke road opposite Potijze Chateau. The GHQ Line, along with most of the rear areas, was under severe artillery fire. The trenches were crowded with wounded men from numerous different regiments, most of whom were falling back from the Frezenberg trenches.

During the night of the 7-8 May there was strong evidence of a coming German assault with numerous probing patrols and small scale attacks. At 5.30 am on the morning of the 8 May a violent bombardment was directed upon the whole of V Corps front, concentrating particularly heavily on 83rd Brigade, singling out the exposed forward slopes of Frezenberg ridge. By 7.00 am the intensity of fire had increased along the front held by the 80th, 83rd and 84th Brigades between the Menin Road and Mouse Trap Farm. Fuelled by a seemingly unlimited supply of ammunition the Germans guns poured high explosive shells on the British line, with the fire reaching a crescendo between 7.10 and 9.10 am, smashing the parapets and destroying the trenches. The enemy guns then lifted on to the support trenches and approach roads, and at 8.30 am the German infantry attacked the Frezenberg ridge. The major part of the assault fell on the trenches previously occupied by the 5th KORL and now held by 3rd Monmouthshire, 2nd KORL, 1st Suffolk and 2nd Cheshire.[97]

Despite occupying a position that was little more than a shell swept ruin, the defenders beat back the attack with rifle and machine gun fire, forcing the German infantry to ground. Two further attacks were made that morning, both of which were halted, but the pressure was becoming unbearable. Eventually the decision was made to evacuate the front line trenches as reinforcements could not be sent forward. The

95 J. M. Cowper, *King's Own Regimental History*, p.60. A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History*, p.19.
96 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History*, p.20.
97 *Official History*, p.314.

withdrawal coincided with a fresh attack and elements of the 3rd Monmouths and 2nd KORL were isolated as the Germans infiltrated around them.[98]

The 5th KORL remained in reserve at the GHQ Line all morning, when around midday the survivors of the 2nd KORL and 3rd Monmouthshire retired through the lines. Testament to the savagery of the fighting is given by the fact that the combined strength of the two units was less than a hundred men.

About 3.00 pm the battalion was ordered to advance and attempt to retake the lost 2nd KORL trenches while the 2nd East Yorkshire were to regain those previously held by the 3rd Monmouthshire. The total strength of the two battalions was only 550 men. As they advanced, initially in artillery formation, they suffered severe losses crossing the open ground swept by machine guns positioned in a house on the north side of the Ypres – Zonnebeke road. Isolated remnants of the 2nd KORL and 3rd Monmouthshire re-entered the battle and attached themselves to the battalion as they moved forward. The attackers carried the advance 1,200 yards beyond the GHQ Line before being halted. It was during this advance that Colonel Cavendish was wounded and Major Eaves assumed command. The battalion took shelter in some trenches running west of Verlorenhoek but could go no further. At 8.00 pm that night, a final valiant attempt was made to reach the objective with a bayonet charge; there was no lack of courage, but the Germans were ready and simply mowed the attackers down before they could gain any ground. Bloodied and spent, the remnants of the battalion stayed in this exposed position during the 9 May under continuous fire. Second Lieutenant Bates, son of Major Bates, and once the youngest officer in the army was shot in the neck and died shortly afterwards. He was barely eighteen years old. Casualties in the 83rd Brigade as a whole were so severe that they could scarcely hold the half mile of front between the railway and the Ypres – Zonnebeke road. The exhausted survivors were eventually relieved that night and made their way back to the huts in Vlamertinghe. The whole brigade was now accommodated in a battalion size camp.[99]

On the 10 May the 83rd brigade was formed into a composite battalion under the command of Colonel Gough of the 3rd Monmouthshire. The composite battalion immediately marched to Potijze to dig shelter trenches during the night. The next day, the 11 May, they moved into the GHQ Line and finally that night, they were relieved and made their way to huts on the main Ypres – Poperinghe road. They had not had a full night of sleep since 1 May.

The total strength of the 5th KORL on 12 May 1915, including a newly arrived draft of 150 soldiers and 90 men in the transport line, was 450 including 11 officers. They had sustained over seven hundred casualties.[100]

98 *Official History*, p.316
99 J. M. Cowper, *King's Own Regimental History*, p.65. A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History*, p.21.
100 A. Hodgkinson, *1/5th Battalion History*, p.21.

Once again the battalion had been used as part of a force to prevent the enemy exploiting an initial breakthrough. This action was merely a continuation of the role played by Geddes' Force on 22-23 April 1915. Had the demands of the French been disregarded and the Salient reduced when it was first considered, there may have been sufficient troops to hold the line in front of the GHQ Line. The absence of a general plan or an achievable objective resulted in the tragic loss of so many Regular and experienced Territorial troops.

It is questionable whether the advances made by the 5th KORL and 2nd East Yorkshire had any influence on the battle. It impossible to ignore the fact that they had been ordered to recapture the worthless Frezenberg trenches; even had they succeeded in that task, the exposed nature of this position would have surely necessitated its eventual abandonment. Conversely, there was a very real fear that the Germans were seeking to breach the ragged British line and the rapid deployment of the reserves was seen as necessary to stop the enemy advance. Ultimately, there was no significant breakthrough and the new British line, although buckled in places, largely stood firm. The 5th KORL had done its duty.

Epilogue

By the 10 May the 5th King's Own Royal Lancaster had been engaged in a battle for over three weeks. Its action, alongside Territorial, Regular and Canadian units, had helped to prevent a German breakthrough at Ypres, but the cost had been immense. The highly trained pre-war battalion had effectively been destroyed.

The sacrifice of the old Regular Army at First Ypres in 1914 and the harrowing experience of the New Armies at the Somme in 1916 have tended to obscure the efforts of the Territorial Force in 1915. The Force provided reinforcements at a critical time and, as this chapter has demonstrated, displayed courage that drew admiration and respect from the Regular Army. It is doubtful if Britain realised what it owed to the Territorials who went abroad before the New Armies were ready. The 5th King's Own Royal Lancaster, with only three months of intensive training and five weeks of front line experience, exhausted and with its ranks depleted, still showed a spirit of gallantry and endurance until the original battalion ceased to exist on 10 May 1915.

10

The Battle of Festubert

Robert Williams

1915 was a year of transition for the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). After the winter of 1914-15 there was hope that movement would somehow be returned to the fighting and that it could be brought to a relatively swift conclusion. For Great Britain though, what was needed was time. The Empire possessed huge resources, but they had to be marshalled, built, trained, equipped and deployed. Material had be manufactured, tested, fine-tuned and issued. Huge numbers of men had flocked to the recruiting stations in 1914 but most were still not fit, in a military sense, to be sent overseas. Yet this need for time had to be balanced against the needs of the French, the major partner in the alliance. France had to expel the enemy from its territory, and it needed to do so sooner rather than later.

From a British perspective 1915 is seen, in hindsight, as a year of treading water, building up the Army for the great offensives of 1916 and 1917. In fighting terms it is remembered, if at all, for Neuve Chapelle and Loos. There is little to be found in the historiography of the war concerning the Battle of Festubert. Aside from the account given in the British *Official History*, Lieutenant-Colonel A. Kearsey's book, *1915 Campaign in France: The Battles of Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Loos* is the only volume that specifically addresses the battle in depth;[1] others merely refer to it because a particular organisation took part in the battle, such as regimental or divisional histories. There are no scholarly works on the subject. It has to all intents and purposes been forgotten.

And yet the battle deserves further study. The genesis of the battle demonstrates the political and military pressures under which the BEF, and more importantly Sir John French, had to operate. These were further amplified by the experiences of his successor, Sir Douglas Haig. Great Britain remained the junior partner on the Western Front, although a partner that became more and more important as the war

1 A. Kearsey, *1915 Campaign in France and Flanders: The Battles of Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Loos* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1929).

progressed. But, as the junior partner, the BEF was often forced to fight as it must rather than as it wished.

The Battle of Festubert, fought over ten days in May 1915, was the longest offensive battle fought by the BEF up to this point in the war. The planning for the battle clearly shows how higher commanders were trying to learn the lessons of the earlier fighting, and overcome the problems that had been encountered at Neuve Chapelle and Aubers Ridge. The balance of surprise bombardment versus extended deployment of firepower was further explored; practical and innovative solutions were employed and tested in the fighting; and new technology was deployed to assist the fighting soldier. At the end of the spring offensives Great Britain had demonstrated its commitment to the cause and had shown in blood that France and Belgium were supported in the battle to expel the invader. The cost, as ever, was high and although no huge amount of ground was taken, tactical and experiential lessons were learned and, more importantly, absorbed.

This chapter will examine the flow of the battle from its inception, through the planning stage to the execution. It will take the form of an analytical narrative, a method chosen simply because the battle is so obscure and little known.

As discussed earlier in this volume, the BEF in 1915 was in a state of great flux, especially in terms of personnel. By the time of Festubert six Territorial divisions had arrived one of which, the 51st (Highland), took part in the battle. An indication of the speed of the change taking place within the BEF came in May when the 9th (Scottish) Division, became the first Kitchener division to be deployed overseas. Their deployment meant that the BEF now consisted of sixteen British infantry divisions, of which ten were Regular, five Territorial and one New Army. All of this change meant that the BEF was trying to absorb different sorts of soldier into its ranks at the same time as fighting and learning to fight.

Of the troops that were heavily involved at Festubert, 2nd Division had been involved in the retreat from Mons, the battles of the Marne and Aisne and the First Battle of Ypres. 7th Division had also taken part at First Ypres as well as Neuve Chapelle. The Meerut Division of the Indian Corps had been involved in the battles of First Ypres, Neuve Chapelle and Aubers Ridge and the Canadian Division had been bloodied at the Second Battle of Ypres only a few weeks earlier. The experience of the early battles of 1915 was beginning to harden the divisions of the BEF, and, with the exception of recently arrived Territorial units, there was sense that the army was beginning to adapt to trench warfare.

Prior to the Second Battle of Ypres planning had been commenced for an ambitious Anglo-French offensive designed to push the Germans out of France and Belgium. No sooner had the Battle of Neuve Chapelle concluded than General Joseph Joffre enquired whether the BEF would co-operate in a French offensive.[2] Sir John French

2 Sir J.E. Edmonds, *History of the Great War, Military Operations France and Belgium 1915, Volume II* (Nashville: Battery Press, 1995) p.2.

replied in the affirmative. The original French plan was for fourteen infantry divisions of Tenth Army, supported by 220 heavy guns and more than 720 field guns and howitzers, to attack and seize Vimy Ridge. This was to be the precursor to an advance into the plain of Douai.[3] The main attack in the centre was to be supplemented by three subsidiary attacks, one to the north and two to the south. The attack to the north, launched by the British First Army, was to begin a day after the main French attack, but on the same day as an attack by French IX Corps. The object of the attack was to widen the breach in the German line and prevent the despatch of German reserves from north of the canal to the plain of Douai.[4] Sir John French planned to commit ten divisions, 100 heavy guns and 500 field guns on 8 May. The object was to be the La Bassee-Lille road from the Festubert-Neuve Chapelle front with a secondary attack towards Aubers-Fromelles.[5]

It was decided to launch the infantry assault at Aubers Ridge immediately following a bombardment of forty minutes, of which the last ten minutes was to be intense. Different types of artillery were assigned different roles and certain artillery brigades were warned to be ready to move at short notice to support the advancing infantry; the objective being six miles away. This plan was almost identical to the plan developed for the attack at Neuve Chapelle in March, which was generally accepted to have been initially successful. Due to weather problems the attack was put back to 9 May and all attacks, French and British, were to be conducted simultaneously. The French bombardment had, however, been conducted over a five day period. The British attack, known as the Battle of Aubers Ridge, failed utterly at the cost of approximately 10,000 casualties:[6]

> The results of the offensive of the 9 May were a serious disappointment, the more so as the French Tenth Army achieved considerable initial successes. The German regiments in the front line opposite the British had been sufficient to withstand all attacks without assistance from reserves.[7]

Indeed, the Germans placed so little importance on the British attack that two divisions of the Sixth Army Reserve, 58th and 115th, entrained to move to the Lens and Vimy sectors, away from the point of the First Army's offensive.[8]

Short of ammunition and reeling in the face of heavy casualties, the British attack at Aubers Ridge was closed down after just 24 hours. The French meanwhile continued their attacks and Sir John French came under intense pressure from his allies to provide some form of assistance. Facing demands to support General Foch at

3 Ibid., p.3.
4 Ibid., p.4.
5 Ibid., p.4.
6 Ibid., p.39.
7 Ibid., p.40.
8 Edward Hancock, *The Battle of Aubers Ridge* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2005) p.142.

Ypres and General Joffre at Vimy, Sir John decided to support both, sending troops north and instructing Haig to prepare to reinstate operations in support of the Vimy attack. The only mention of the Battle of Festubert in Haig's private papers concerns his preparations for the attack; on 11 May he noted that his conclusions from Aubers Ridge were:

1. The defences in our front are so carefully and so strongly made, and mutual support with machine-guns is so complete, that in order to demolish them a *long methodical bombardment* will be necessary by heavy artillery (guns and howitzers) before Infantry are sent forward to attack.
2. To destroy the enemy's "material" 60 pr guns will be tried, as well as the 15-in., 9.2 and 6-in. siege hows. Accurate observations of *each shot* will be arranged so as to make sure of flattening out the enemy's "strong points" of support, before the Infantry is launched.[9]

And so began what became standard British artillery preparations before an offensive. Learning not only from recent experience, but also from the French experience at Vimy, the British adopted a lengthy, heavy and powerful artillery bombardment to destroy enemy trench lines, strong points and degrade its manpower. In his desire to wear down the power of resistance of the enemy infantry and shake its morale Haig was also demonstrating the first signs of the policy of attrition that came to dominate British military thinking for the rest of the war.[10]

The new British offensive was also to feature a two-pronged assault. To the north was the Indian Corps, on its right was 2nd Division and then, after a 600-yard gap was 7th Division. South of Festubert 47th and 1st Divisions held the line. 51st Division was held in general reserve, together with the Indian Cavalry Corps.[11] Sir John French had envisaged an attack of ten divisions – in reality it was now one of five. Drawing upon the lessons of Aubers Ridge, the size of the gap between the two prongs of the attack was reduced from 6000 to 600 yards to allow greater mutual support. The original gap had been far too large and had meant the two arms of the pincers were, in effect, separate battles unable to support each other and unable to draw away the fire of the defenders from their sister division. Instead of a far-flung objective, as in the case of Aubers Ridge, where the objective was 3000 yards away, it was now to be La Quinque Rue (the road from Festubert to La Tourelle) just 1000 yards distant. The planning for the battle therefore resembled the methodical 'step by step' attacks that were to become a feature in 1916 and 1917 rather than the over ambitious battles of early 1915.

9 Robert Blake (ed), *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig 1914-1919* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1952) p.93. Emphasis in the original.
10 Edmonds, *History of the Great War,* p.47.
11 Ibid., pp.48-49.

The attacking British troops were, from the north, Garhwal Brigade of Meerut Division with 39/Garhwali Rifles and 2/Leicestershire Regiment [2/Leicesters] ; 5th Brigade of 2nd Division with 2/Worcestershire Regiment [2/Worcesters] and 2/Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers [2/RIF] ; 6th Brigade of 2nd Division with 1/Kings Royal Rifle Corps [1/KRRC] and 1/Royal Berkshire Regiment [1/R Berks] across the 600 yard gap; 20th Brigade of 7th Division with 2/Border Regiment [2/Border] and 2/Scots Guards; and on the southern flank was 22nd Brigade of 7th Division with 2/Queen's Regiment [2/Queen's] and 1/Royal Welsh Fusiliers [1/RWF].

The plan as whole reflected lessons learned from the earlier battles of 1915 but it also included a genuine innovation. This was the decision by Major-General Henry Horne, officer commanding 2nd Division, to launch his part of the assault at night. This was the first occasion in the war when the British launched a large scale night attack. The decision was made for good reasons. The division knew the ground over which the attack was to be made and moving under cover of darkness ensured an element of surprise and diminished the ability of the enemy to observe the attack.[12] Timing was important and the attackers aimed to secure a foothold in the German frontline before dawn. A night attack was not deemed feasible for 7th Division however, as they were new to the area and did not know the ground. A daylight advance was also necessary to allow the troops to tackle the extensive array of dykes and other obstacles which would disrupt the troops at night-time.

Night attacks were fraught with problems, being especially difficult to control, and so the decision to launch one was particularly bold and laudable. The downside though, was that there would be an appreciable delay in time between the attacks of 2nd and 7th Divisions. This created a mismatch. 2nd Division would attack with the benefit of surprise, but 7th Division would be advancing against a German line which had already been engaged and which would therefore be battle ready. Horne hoped to offset this problem by renewing his own advance in the daylight, using the captured German line as a jumping off point, thereby assisting 7th Division by placing renewed pressure on the defenders.

Whilst the infantry planned their assault, the artillery came to grips with its new style of bombardment. As previously noted, the artillery preparation was intended to be accurate, methodical and destructive, seeking permanent neutralisation rather than temporary suppression. The artillery bombardment opened on the morning of 13 May. A total of 433 guns and howitzers were employed in the attack, on a frontage of 5000 yards. The plan was that for the daytime hours the divisional artillery would carry out three bombardments of the front defences, each of two hours' duration, at a slow rate and with careful observation of fall of shot. The 6-inch siege howitzer batteries were each allocated 250 yards of German frontline trench, whilst the 4.5-inch howitzers were to bombard support and communication trenches and certain salients. Some field guns were directed to destroy the barbed wire whilst

12 Kearsey, *1915 Campaign in* France, p.32.

others, together with the horse artillery fired on communication trenches. The heavy artillery concentrated on counter-battery work, continuing the work throughout the night but at a slower rate of fire to preserve ammunition. In the hours of darkness the field guns attacked communication trenches with shrapnel to disrupt supplies and troop movements. The allocation of ammunition to each field gun was 100 rounds per day, and to each howitzer, 50 rounds per day.[13] In addition to the artillery, the British also utilised 1st Wing Royal Flying Corps to concentrate bombing attacks on villages believed to be German billets, as well as known observation posts, headquarters and means of communication.

On 2nd Division front the artillery plan for 14 and 15 May called for the bombardment to quicken between 9.55 am and 10am and again between 2.55 and 3pm. At the end of each of those two periods all artillery fire was to stop completely for five minutes, after which a burst of shrapnel fire was to be fired at the trench. These false lifts were intended to catch those soldiers who manned the fire-step believing the end of the bombardment heralded an infantry assault, as well as confusing the enemy and disguising the real timing of the attack.[14]

The artillery plan was certainly imaginative and was a marked departure from previous British actions. The attempt to balance surprise and methodical destruction was a difficult one, but it showed a willingness to change tactics and innovate. The success of the preparatory artillery bombardment hinged on good observation, to enable strong points, trenches and wire obstacles to be hit and destroyed. However, rain started to fall on the night of 12 May, continuing through 13 May and into the early hours of 14 May. This not only affected visibility but reduced the effectiveness of the high explosives; as a result the infantry assault was postponed by 24 hours.[15] This delay was a deeply unwelcome one for the infantry. 1/KRRC, 6th Brigade, spent a miserable two days on 14 and 15 May waiting for the attack to begin. Their war diary is interesting in that, despite the efforts of British heavy artillery to provide counter battery fire, they remained under heavy German bombardment throughout this time.

However, the delay may have been inadvertently fortuitous. The humid evening of 16 May gave way to a dark, moonless night, presenting ideal conditions for the attack. 1/KRRC's objective was 350 yards across no man's land, which here was mostly flat and without the drainage ditches prevalent elsewhere. There was one dyke, parallel to the trench line, about 12 feet wide and 20 yards in front of the trench.[16] Bridges had been prepared in advance to cross this dyke and openings made in the wire to allow the assaulting troops to advance, whilst troops in the frontline carried on "normal" sniping to allay any suspicions the Germans may have had. For communications, the attacking troops took with them three signallers, equipped with a telephone and

13 Edmonds, *History of the Great War,* p.53.
14 The National Archives (TNA) WO/95/1285: 2nd Division Headquarters War Diary.
15 Edmonds, *History of the Great War,* p.55.
16 TNA WO/95/1358: 1/King's Royal Rifle Corps War Diary.

two lamps, one to be used when the first trench was captured and the other if the second was taken; an interesting attempt to overcome what was to become a perennial problem during the war, the ability to establish communication between attacking troops and headquarters units.

At 11.30 pm 2nd Division moved forward from its trenches. It was five minutes before the Germans noticed something was happening and they reacted by launching distress flares to summon artillery support, by which time the attackers were very close indeed. As a result much of the German artillery fire fell into empty areas of no man's land and did little to stop the momentum of the assault. Furthermore, in the darkness German small arms fire was inevitably inaccurate and, although machine gun fire continued from the flanks, this does not seem to have hampered the advance. The defenders in the front line were thus left isolated and were swiftly overwhelmed. By midnight Morse code signals, sent by torch, were observed from the British line. It took a while to confirm but then the lamp was observed, both German lines had been taken.[17] The writer of the war diary then made his way to the captured trench and reported that, "the first line of captured breastworks we saw that the wire in front of it had been almost completely destroyed and the breastworks themselves much damaged though not destroyed by shell fire."[18]

On the right of 1/KRRC were 1/R Berks. 'C' Company was to lie out 50 yards in front of the British line then advance to take the first German trench 450 yards away. To assist in the assault the attackers were issued with 250 grenades. 'A' Company was to initially remain in the trenches, keeping up sniping fire to cover the first advance.[19] 'D' Company was to push through 'C' and take the second line. 1/R Berks were also to use a system of light signalling to report back on the results of the attack. Each man was carrying 200 rounds of ammunition except the grenadiers who carried 100 rounds and six grenades each. The commanding officer, Major C. Hill, decided that 'C' Company would advance at 11.30pm, 'D' at 11.32pm and 'B' at 11.37pm. 'C' Company left the British front line at 10.30pm to enable them to form up in time and close the gap between the front lines, followed by the other companies. The battalion was to attack on a frontage of 200 yards. The battalion machine guns were in rear of 'B' Company.

The forming up of the battalion for the attack went without a hitch and there was no reaction from the German trenches. At 11.30pm 'C' Company advanced at quick time for 150 yards, at which point the Germans opened up a very heavy fire prompting the attackers to rush forward for the remaining 200 yards. They bombed the trenches, closed in (actually grabbing German rifles by the muzzles in some case) and then engaged in murderous hand-to-hand fighting. 'D' Company was following hard on their heels and pushed on and into the second line 80 yards further on, followed

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 TNA: WO/95/1361: 1/Royal Berkshire Regiment War Diary.

by 'B' Company. By 11.45pm the CO arrived in the line with two platoons of 'A' Company and consolidation of the trenches took place. The attack had been strikingly successful, but it had been brought at a cost: the initial tally was four officers and forty-five other ranks killed, three officers and 287 other ranks wounded and two officers and seventy-five other ranks missing.[20]

On the left of 6th Brigade was 5th Brigade, the right hand battalion of which was 2/RIF. Their war diary records that during 13 May they sustained casualties, presumably from artillery bombardment, of one killed and nine wounded; again on 14 May they had two officers wounded, three other ranks killed and fifteen wounded. On 15 May before the attack had even begun they lost one killed and twenty wounded. These statistics bear testament to the fact that the German artillery was not being silenced by the pre-offensive bombardment. Fifty-one casualties in three days was a serious depletion of strength and illustrates the resilience of the German defences and the lethality of their gunners.[21]

On the left of 2/RIF were 2/Worcesters. They were to attack on a frontage of 320 yards; there were to be successive lines of attack, 100 yards apart. The men did not have to climb out of the trenches, as being behind breastworks meant tunnels had been created to allow the men access to no man's land. It took one hour and twenty minutes from 10pm for the battalion, supported by a working party of the Glasgow Highlanders, to file out through the tunnels and assemble for the assault. In order not to alert the enemy the men had been ordered to advance in silence and at a walking pace until the German front line was reached, at which point the men were to rush it. Unfortunately, the difficulties of coordination now became apparent. Two minutes before the attack was to be launched, the Germans, possibly alerted by the sounds of movement in no man's land,[22] opened up a very heavy rifle and machine-gun fire into which 2/Worcesters were forced to advance. The left Company, 'D', could make no advance at all. 'B' Company, followed by 'A', did manage to rush forward and got close to the German wire, but in such small numbers that no further progress could be made. The Glasgow Highlanders, who had been carrying picks, shovels and sandbags to consolidate the newly captured trenches, now found themselves having to launch an attack to try to capture them. Unfortunately, only a few men reached the trenches and all who did were cut down.[23] The attack had been a complete failure, with no ground being captured. The reason for the disaster in this sector was to be found further to the north, in the Indian Corps sector.

To the north of 5th Brigade were the troops of the Meerut Division and to the north of them the Lahore Division, stationed opposite Port Arthur. The Indian Corps

20 Ibid.
21 TNA: WO/95/1350: 2/Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers War Diary.
22 H. FitzMaurice Stacke, *The Worcestershire Regiment in the Great War* (Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, n.d.). p.71 claims that the Germans were alerted by the 'wild Irish yells' of the nearby Inniskillings.
23 TNA: WO/95/1351: 2/Worcestershire Regiment War Diary.

Artists impression of Indian soldiers charging into action at Festubert. (Editor's collection)

2/Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (5th Brigade, 2nd Division) three days prior to the opening of the Battle of Festubert. The battalion sustained over 700 casualties killed, wounded and missing during subsequent operations. (The Inniskillings Museum)

consisted of both British and Indian troops, each brigade being bolstered with a British battalion, although in 1915 each brigade also had a British Territorial unit posted to it. Indian battalions were organised differently compared to British ones due to having both British and Indian officers; there were twelve British and seventeen Indian officers with the lowest ranked British officer being senior to all Indian officers. Each Indian battalion had a paper strength of 729 Indian other ranks.[24] By the time of Festubert the Indian Corps was somewhat battle worn and was still recovering from its losses at Second Ypres and Aubers Ridge.[25] The Sirhind Brigade had replaced the Dehra Dun Brigade in the Meerut Division, due to the latter having been badly mauled in the Battle of Aubers Ridge. Self-inflicted wounds rose noticeably in April and May 1915 and strict measures were put in force to stamp this practice out.[26] In addition the Indian Corps suffered with a lack of material too, especially artillery, when compared to British divisions.

The Meerut Division had been ordered to advance 1000 yards to the Festubert – La Tourelle road. There, it would consolidate, re-organise, issue more ammunition and establish communications. A further bombardment would then be put down on the line Rue d'Ouvert – Rue de Marais before a second advance of 1000 yards; in a bid not to be too prescriptive, and to allow the initiative to be seized, the plan allowed for further advance if the opportunity arose.[27] The decision to build this into the plan arose from experience at Neuve Chapelle, where advances had been halted to allow for further artillery bombardments; unfortunately these had been completely unnecessary.

Each attacking battalion advanced with an impressive six machine-guns, but this had only been achieved by pooling the resources of the whole of the Indian Corps. Bridges were placed over the dykes and ditches in front of the Indian line and the men of the Garhwal Brigade were in position even though some of the carrying troops had become casualties due to shellfire. At 11.30pm the barrage lifted off the German front line and the assaulting troops, 39/Garhwal Rifles and 2/Leicesters, rose to the attack. Almost immediately the Germans illuminated no man's land with flares, searchlights and star shells, leaving the British and Indians cruelly exposed. The Germans could see everything; the attackers, looking into the light, could see nothing. The Indian Corps was subjected to a storm of rifle, machine gun and trench mortar fire that ripped great gaps in the ranks. The bridges over the dykes became blocked with the dead and the dying. Follow up waves were halted by these human barricades and were mown down in turn. Shell-holes, felled trees and the incessant machine-gun fire

24 Gordon Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches, The Indian Corps on the Western Front 1914-1915* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1999) p.1.
25 For further details, see George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front: India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp.154-171.
26 Corrigan, *Sepoys*, p.174.
27 Ibid., p.209.

proved impenetrable barriers. Within half an hour it was obvious that the attacking troops could make no progress and they were pulled out of the attack. The 39/Garhwal Rifles had suffered 154 casualties and 2/Leicesters had lost 228 men; neither battalion had gained a yard of ground.[28] In that short space of time two battalions had ceased to be effective fighting forces and the attack had come to naught.

The reason why such a fate befell this attack probably lies in an instruction contained in the Indian Corps operational orders. To the north of the Meerut Division lay the Lahore Division and their part in proceedings was to assist with rifle and machine gun fire throughout the attack, "to mislead the enemy."[29] The Jullundur Brigade had been instructed to fire five-minute long "controlled bursts of fire" at 8.45pm, 9.30pm, 10pm and 10.30pm. Crucially, these instructions only applied to the night of 15 May. The Indian Corps likely intended that this shooting would suppress, distract and harass the enemy, whilst simultaneously lulling them into a false sense of security when no actual attack materialised. Unfortunately, it had the opposite effect. It made the Germans suspicious of British activity and placed them in a high state of alert. The tragic consequences were revealed by the immediate and deadly response of the defenders when the attack was finally launched. This level of alertness then appears to have spread down the German line to affect the attack of some of the battalions of 5th Brigade. It was very unfortunate that something that had been designed to confuse the enemy and cause them to be cautious served only to place them on their guard; if such a fire pattern had also been established on 13 and 14 May then it may not have caused such a reaction. In such circumstances 5th Brigade and Dehra Dun Brigade could also have advanced relatively unopposed across no man's land to take and secure the first two German trenches as had happened elsewhere.

Yet, as a whole, the night attack had gone well and stood in great contrast to the disastrous British attack at Aubers Ridge a week earlier. At Festubert troops had had to make their way out of their lines, either by climbing or crawling through tunnels; they had then had to form up and wait for the attack to commence and this was achieved without alerting the enemy. They had then advanced across sodden, uneven ground before closing in for hand to hand combat. It was unfortunate that an attempt at deceiving the enemy had in fact alerted him on a portion of the front, but as a whole the British could be satisfied with their work. The attackers had stormed the German line and secured a firm position, and there was little evidence of the Germans being organised enough to mount an immediate counter-attack.

The first phase of the initial attack was now over and there were only a few hours until the second phase would start; the dawn attack of 7th Division, to be conducted by 20th and 22nd Brigades. These were to be accompanied by renewed assaults by those units involved in the night attack as they fought to widen the breach.

28 Ibid., p.210.
29 Edmonds, *History of the Great War,* p.57.

20th Brigade was on the far right of the British line in this attack; to their left 22nd Brigade was the first attacking unit after the gap between the two arms of the pincer. 7th Divison's assault frontage was 850 yards; 22nd Brigade for 400 yards across Rue des Cailloux and 20th Brigade, after a short gap, of 350 yards across Princes Road. The frontage was deliberately narrow to concentrate the weight of the attack. The initial objective was the German front line, between 80 and 200 yards away and then another 1000 yards to the secondary objective – the "North Breastwork".

The artillery fire plan for 7th Division was broadly similar to that of 2nd Division, with one significant alteration due to the attack taking place at dawn rather than at night. In addition to bombarding the German trenches that were the target of the attack, 7th Division's guns also bombarded the front line to either side of the assault sector in an attempt to suppress any enfilade fire during the advance. Accordingly, at 2.45am the British barrage moved into a high state of intensity which lasted until 3.15am. Interestingly, this was supplemented by six 'parapet' guns which had been brought forward overnight into prepared emplacements in the British breastwork to provide direct fire support. These guns fired high explosive shells over open sights directly into the German front line, with considerable success.[30]

22nd Brigade's assault was to be led by 2/Queen's north of Rue des Cailloux and 1/RWF to the south, supported respectively by 1/South Staffordshire Regiment [1/South Staffs] and 2/Royal Warwickshire Regiment [2/RWR].[31] 2/Queen's advanced in eight lines of half companies, 50 yards between each line, climbing out of the trenches only when the barrage lifted. Their advance was to be of 180 yards over difficult, uneven ground criss-crossed with ditches and covered in long grass.[32] Day was breaking as the leading troops of 'A' Company emerged from their trenches, and they were met with intense rifle fire from the German line; the defenders seemed, according to the battalion adjutant, "in no way affected by the artillery bombardment".[33] Even before all of the attackers had left the trench a request was made to the artillery to recommence its bombardment for fifteen minutes; the gunners swiftly complied. This unexpected resumption of artillery fire appears to have worked for not only did it enable all of the battalion to move forward but the German defenders were forced to evacuate their trench, moving laterally along it away from the point of attack. The Brigade Grenade Company was then able to launch an attack on the enemy front line which further pushed the German defenders away to their left for a considerable distance. The first German trench was taken and about 230 officers and men then advanced towards the second objective which was seized by 6am in the face of minimal opposition.[34]

30 Ibid., p.59.
31 TNA: WO/95/1660: 22nd Brigade Headquarters War Diary.
32 TNA: WO/95/1664: 2/Queen's Royal West Surrey War Diary.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.

On their left 1/RWF attacked in the same formation but had to use bridges to cross ditches in their front. They too encountered stiff opposition from rifle and machine gun fire. The attackers suffered considerable losses, especially amongst senior officers. The commanding officer, Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel Gabbett, the second-in-command and three company commanders were all killed crossing no man's land and only three officers of the rear two companies survived the advance. Nevertheless, the battalion pushed on and was able to capture the first and second German trenches. Behind them, the 2/RWR had moved into the British front line vacated by 1/RWF which was now being heavily shelled by German guns. Such were the casualties being endured by 1/RWF that the 2/RWR demolished part of a trench barricade to facilitate entry of the wounded.[35]

Contact having been made with the Scots Guards on their left, part of the battalion turned with them to face heavy enfilade fire from that flank. From this point the battalion became fragmented and heavily mixed up with the Guards. At 7am one company of 2/RWR joined a small portion of the battalion and made it to the final objective. Shortly thereafter two more companies of 2/RWR and two of 2/Queen's linked up with 1/RWF, securing the objective.[36]

It was at this point that the British discovered that capturing a trench was comparatively simple compared to actually holding it. At about 2pm German shelling of the exposed elements of the forward British troops started and the latter found that the captured communication trench provided neither protection nor a suitable position for consolidation. Attempts to expand the lodgement failed. The Brigade Trench Mortar Battery and 100 men of 3/London Regiment captured an orchard to the battalion's left, but it was soon found that it could not be held in the face of intense enemy fire. The steady drumbeat of German artillery inflicted heavy losses on the battalions in the captured trenches. Pounded by shellfire, the line became fragmented and broke down into pockets of survivors clustered around the remaining officers and NCOs. It was clear that the position was untenable and gradually the men were pulled back to the old German front line. Of a strength of 25 officers and 806 men the 1/RWF had lost eight officers killed, nine wounded and two missing and 118 other ranks killed, 271 wounded and 170 missing.[37]

1/South Staffs had moved up to the front line vacated by 2/Queen's and 'B' Company had then advanced on the right of the latter the 150 yards to the German line followed by 'A', 'D' and 'C'. The German trench had been rushed and 'B' Company, together with "bomb throwers" had cleared the trench. This bland phrase concealed the fact that the trench in question was some quarter of a mile in length and had to be cleared through bitter, close range combat. In the process, Company Sergeant Major Barter (1/RWF attached to Brigade Bombing Company) and his seven men captured 97

35 TNA: WO/95/1664: 2/Royal Warwickshire Regiment War Diary.
36 TNA: WO/95/1665: 1/Royal Welsh Fusiliers War Diary.
37 Ibid.

prisoners.[38] Whilst the assault had suffered few casualties, holding the ground under the merciless German bombardment was costly, and the 1/South Staffs lost around 280 men in the next two days.[39]

To the left 20th Brigade prepared for its attack with 2/Scots Guards on the right adjoining 22nd Brigade and on the left 2/Border Regiment [2/Border]; supported by 2/Gordon Highlanders and 1/Grenadier Guards respectively. The plan for 2/Scots Guards was that they would leave the trenches at 3.12am and use the last three minutes of the bombardment to cross no man's land. So rapid was the Scottish advance that the first line of attackers had actually reached the German parapet whilst British artillery shells were still falling upon it.[40] Having swarmed over the German defenders, the Scots pushed on towards an orchard preparatory to swinging left, anchoring the right on La Quinque Rue. The captured trench would be consolidated by the last line of the battalion.

However, to the left, the 2/Border were in grave difficulties. The advance of 'A' Company had been checked when two 'shorts' from a British howitzer ploughed in amongst the men; recovering from this 'friendly fire' setback they reorganised and advanced once more, capturing the German front line. However, time and momentum had been lost, and the advance ground to halt against a waterlogged ditch covered by lethal enfilade machine gun fire.[41] Eighty Brigade bombers joined 'B' Company in the front line and repeatedly tried to drive the Germans away from the hard won position. Although the efforts achieved temporary success, the British were unable to secure the trench, lacking sufficient grenades to sustain the battle and suffering from debilitating fire from an accurate German trench mortar.

The failure of 2/Border to make good progress left the left flank of 2/Scots Guards exposed to murderous enfilade fire. With their men pinned down the Scottish advance stalled, giving the Germans time to reorganise and launch a fierce counter-attack. In the bitter close range battle that followed 'F' Company was cut off from the rest of the battalion and all but destroyed, with just forty men managing to withdraw from the inferno. Buoyed by their success the Germans pressed forward and fell upon the second and third lines of the Scots, only to be swiftly beaten back by the fire of Guards' machine guns.[42] The situation here quickly stagnated as neither side could overcome the other and advance.

Some of 7th Division's difficulties can be attributed to the failure of 2nd and Meerut Divisions to renew their assaults. The pre-battle plans for these formations to continue their advance at dawn came to naught. Although 2nd Division had been successful in the hours of darkness, units were jumbled up, the men were tired and the Germans

38 TNA: WO/95/1660: 22nd Brigade Headquarters War Diary.
39 TNA: WO/95/1664: 1/South Staffordshire Regiment War Diary.
40 TNA: WO/95/1657: 2/Scots Guards War Diary.
41 TNA: WO/95/1655: 2/Border Regiment War Diary.
42 TNA: WO/95/1657: 2/Scots Guards War Diary.

had had time to recover from their initial surprise and organise a fresh defensive position that would require further artillery preparation to break down. Attempts to press forward failed; as a result a good decision was made not to reinforce failure, but instead to close down that part of the front where no advance had been made.[43]

The first phase of the battle was over. From the north, the Dehra Dun Brigade had not achieved any objective, nor had the northern half of 5th Brigade, but the southern half had gained some portions of the German line. 6th Brigade had achieved its objectives and taken the German trenches. 20th Brigade had taken all of its initial objectives and half of its secondary objectives. 22nd Brigade also took all of its initial objectives but could press forward little further. Compared to the Battle of Aubers Ridge a few days before, there was plenty for the British high command to be pleased with. Progress had been made in all but the most northerly of the attacks. Except in the north the night attack had been generally successful. Had it not been for the reckless decision to mount 'diversionary' fire on the north flank then both the Dehra Dun and 5th Brigade might have achieved a great deal more. Night attacks are fraught with danger but it speaks well of 2nd Division's staff work that there seem to have been no problems in moving and assembling the troops in the dark. The use of torches and signal lamps to maintain communications had proved effective. The troops had displayed a good ability to move, manoeuvre and fight in the dark. In many cases the attacking troops had advanced all the way to the German line with no retaliatory fire.

Mixed results had been obtained by the use of grenades. In some cases these had achieved success, at other times British troops had not had enough of these to overcome the defenders; nevertheless it would appear that when close-quarter combat was called for the British were at least the equal of the Germans. It is clear that the infantry had fought well in both the night and the dawn attacks. What had not been totally successful had been the artillery bombardment. There is plenty of evidence to show that German artillery had remained fully active; attacking troops had found parts of the German line to be little damaged but this criticism must be moderated by the fact that in contrast to Aubers Ridge the German wire appears to have been well cut, and there is little evidence of British troops being stranded in no man's land, unable to penetrate the wire entanglements.

On 17 May the primary objective was to close the gap between 2nd and 7th Divisions although Sir John French asked Haig to bear in mind, "that the main object to aim at for the present is to continue relentlessly to wear down the enemy by exhaustion and prevent him from detaching troops to oppose the French".[44] The terms of the engagement were set. The British would fulfil their strategic obligations to assist the French by fighting a largely tactical battle, seeking to destroy the enemy and improve the overall BEF position in the process. However, the Germans were not content to passively await the next British blow. Unbeknownst to the attackers, the defenders

43 Edmonds, *History of the Great War,* p.58.
44 Ibid., p.65.

abandoned the ground between 'South Breastwork' and Ferme du Bois, falling back 1200 yards to a new and, by virtue of hasty labour, increasingly strong line. The British would not discover this move for several days.

At 2.45am that day a bombardment was commenced of the area around the 'Quadrilateral'. The infantry of 2nd and 7th Divisions were informed that they would attack at 8am but, given the slowness of message transmission this timeframe was impossible. Instead, the infantry assault was delayed, first to 9am and then to 10.30am. But then, upon receiving news that large numbers of demoralised Germans in the 'Quadrilateral' were surrendering, the attack was hurried forward to 9.30am. This confusing process of order and counter order meant that the divisions did not attack simultaneously.

Yet despite the muddle the initial advance was successful although some pockets of German resistance held out and proved difficult to subdue. Unfortunately, the initial reports of success and the large number of prisoners taken led Haig to the over optimistic conclusion "That there are signs the enemy's resistance is breaking down."[45] In fact, by the afternoon German defences were hardening. Further British attacks, again carried out piecemeal, were stopped dead in their tracks. The iron law of diminishing returns had taken hold. The British were less co-ordinated than on the first day, with arrangements being made and changed much quicker than the machinery of the army could react. There was also much disorganisation at the front. The time lapse between orders being transmitted and enacted is striking. For example, 2nd Division's orders for a new attack arrived at 4th Brigade at 2pm and at 3.35pm the Brigade issued its orders to its battalions.[46] 2/Grenadier Guards, having been at a minute's notice to move since 7am, set off at 3.45pm for Rue des Cailloux. From 5pm they started to take over the line but suffered, "immense difficulty owing to darkness coming on, mud, shellholes and disorganisation of Battalions already in the line."[47] During the evening they were supplied with, "tools, ammunition, Very lights, sandbags, rifle grenades and trench mortar ammunition."[48] No attack actually took place.

21st Brigade recorded that in the afternoon its attacks were meeting considerable resistance. 2/Wiltshire Regiment had to withdraw from its captured trench as it was impossible to hold due to enfilade artillery fire, as did 2/Yorkshire Regiment. The 2/Bedfordshire Regiment [2/Bedfords] and 4/Cameron Highlanders [4/Camerons] attacked in the evening. Unfortunately the ground could not be reconnoitred prior to the attack and the tall grass was found to conceal a network of deep ditches and dykes. 2/Bedfords were forced back when the advance lost impetus owing to having to swim across 10–12 feet wide ditches under intense machine gun fire. Nine platoons of the 4/Camerons had made it into their objective, a German communication trench

45 Ibid., p.68.
46 TNA: WO/95/1341: 4th Brigade Headquarters War Diary.
47 TNA: WO/95/1342: 2/Grenadier Guards War Diary.
48 TNA: WO/95/1341: 4th Brigade Headquarters War Diary.

now used as a fire trench, but Germans remained in the trenches to the left and right. Ultimately, the Scotsmen could not hold their hard won gains. The next morning they faced a German grenade counter-attack which they were all but powerless to resist, having lost their own supply of grenades whilst swimming across the ditches.[49] Forced back to their original trenches, the 4/Camerons had lost thirteen officers and 215 men, including the CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Fraser.[50]

The early attacks had succeeded as they were launched against areas that were being evacuated by the defenders. However, as the day wore on assaults ran up against a new, fully formed German line and resistance was stiff. Similar problems befell the troops on 18 May. After a very wet night Haig decided to launch another assault and issued orders at 1.55pm for a bombardment to begin at 2.30pm, intensifying at 4.00pm and climaxing between 4.20pm and 4.30pm, at which point the infantry would advance. However, the timings were unrealistic for the infantry; one brigade commander did not receive the orders until 2.45pm, issuing his own orders at 3.20pm which then only reached the infantry just before zero hour. Furthermore the artillery did not commence the bombardment until after 3.00pm. Unfortunately the barrage fell on the old German positions, as the new ones had still not been discovered.[51] All in all a combination of hasty orders, inadequate preparation time, inaccurate bombardment and the fact that the new German positions had not been located presented the attacking infantry with an almost impossible task.

2/Grenadier Guards had endured a very cold night and half the battalion had been employed in digging new entrenchments. They were heavily shelled all day and at 3pm received the order to attack, which they duly did at 4.30pm. A single terse comment in the war diary summed up the result: "the attack was a failure owing to flatness of country swept by machine gun fire and enfilade artillery fire".[52] As the Guards' attack was called off 3rd Canadian Brigade finally arrived at the front, with 14/Canadian Battalion and 16/Canadian Battalion detailed for a fresh assault. 14/Canadian moved approximately 400 yards from their start line before the machine gun and artillery fire brought it to a halt. 16/Canadian worked their way round and came up on their right; the gap in the British line had at least been filled.[53]

The events of 15 and 16 May show that the British Army of early 1915 was certainly learning its lessons in terms of planning for and executing an attack, but once the first day was over and plans had to be altered and amended there appeared to be a lack of realism. Hasty decisions were made at the highest level and, try as they might, subordinate organisations such as divisions and brigades could not process the requests quickly enough. This led to cancelled attacks, late or postponed artillery barrages, and

49 TNA: WO/95/1658: 21st Brigade Headquarters War Diary.
50 TNA: WO/95/1659: 4/Cameron Highlanders War Diary.
51 Edmonds, *History of the Great War,* p.72.
52 TNA: WO/95/1342: 2/Grenadier Guards.
53 Col GWL Nicholson, *The Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War, Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Roger Duhamel, 1962), p.99.

infantry units desperately trying to get into position for assaults and then finding that neighbouring units had not attacked or had already attacked and been repulsed. There was a lack of continuity, a lack of synchronisation and assaults were uncoordinated as a consequence. As a result casualties mounted even as the amount of ground gained dwindled.

The battle was still not over. I Corps was withdrawn to be replaced by 1st Canadian and 47th Divisions, together commanded by Lieutenant-General Edwin Alderson as "Alderson's Force". On the morning of 20 May the two divisions were ordered to attack and take objectives between 600 and 1000 yards away. Due to delays in 47th Division relieving 2nd Division, Alderson instead ordered 2nd and 3rd Canadian Brigades to delay their attack until 7.45pm. The assault was to be preceded by an intense artillery bombardment involving all of First Army's guns. 2nd Canadian Brigade was to attack a point near the junction of the old and new German lines; 3rd Canadian Brigade was to seize what was to become known as Canadian Orchard.[54] But the attack was doomed almost before it began. 2nd Canadian Brigade had spent the whole morning subjected to very heavy artillery fire in their new position and was already bloodied and disrupted before it began its advance. 10th Canadian Battalion spearheaded the assault but could make no progress. "The attack was a complete failure" recorded the brigade war diary, adding a list of causes: "no previous reconnaissance of the enemy's position … the bombardment was quite ineffectual … the troops detailed for the attack were in full view of the enemy … and the attack was timed for an hour before dusk."[55] In fact, Brigadier-General Arthur Currie, officer commanding 2nd Canadian Brigade, had carried out a personal reconnaissance of the area in the afternoon but had been unable to identify the objective.[56]

The attack of 15/Canadian Battalion of 3rd Canadian Brigade was also unsuccessful, largely owing to it taking place in daylight across ground devoid of cover. They advanced in short twenty-yard dashes but were held up by intense fire one hundred yards short of the German line. 16/Canadian had more success, establishing an advanced post in a house near La Quinque Rue in the afternoon of 19 May with two machine guns and thirty men. These men were reinforced with two platoons from each of 2 and 4 Companies to support the attack. The battalion advanced into a hail of machine gun fire but was able to storm the Orchard and evict the defenders. This small, bloody action turned on the ability of the Canadians to bring a machine gun into action, which was used with deadly effect against its German counterpart. The second attack to the south of the Orchard failed. Even so, an important position had been taken under very difficult conditions.[57]

54 Ibid., p.100.
55 Library and Archives Canada, RG9/4870: 2nd Canadian Brigade Headquarters War Diary.
56 Nicholson, *The Canadian Army*, p.100.
57 Library and Archives Canada, RG9/4925: 16/Canadian Battalion War Diary.

Alderson's Force was ordered to renew the assaults early on the morning of 21 May, but this was postponed until the night, to allow for a more thorough artillery preparation.[58] The force was to attack on a front of 1500 yards and was to secure access to the Rue d'Ouvert. The bombardment lasted for three and a half hours but once again, "proved woefully ineffective."[59] The bombardment was carried out by widely dispersed field guns that fired mainly shrapnel; unfortunately, the counter-battery fire singularly failed to silence the higher calibre, more powerful, German guns. Once again 10/Canadian Battalion launched two attacks, to left and right supported by 1st Canadian Brigade's bombers with 500 grenades. The left hand attack, from the north-east of the trench attacked across the open over 200 yards and was simply annihilated. The right hand attack, from the south-west, met with less resistance and drove the enemy out of 400 yards of trenches, thanks mainly to the efforts of the bombers.[60] During the night numerous enemy counter-attacks were driven off but the next day all except 100 yards of the captured trench was evacuated due to intense German artillery fire.[61]

On the morning of 22 May General Haig visited the Canadian Division headquarters, according to the Canadian Official History, "to express dissatisfaction at the failure of the Canadian attacks and to insist that the Germans be driven from the positions."[62] On 23 May a fresh attack by 47th and Canadian Divisions was ordered, to be preceded by a thorough reconnaissance, to reduce the German salient opposite. This salient extended for 3000 yards and the northern section was to be attacked by the Canadians. Another night attack was ordered, following a slow, continuous bombardment during the day. Once again bridges had been laid to get the infantry across the water-filled ditches and 5/Canadian Battalion assaulted the apex of the salient. The infantry advanced to the German line and drove them back with grenades, gaining 250 yards of the trench line. The men were once again subjected to a ferocious German retaliatory barrage and a number of enemy attacks were repulsed by the British artillery.[63] For 47th Division, 8/London Regiment were detailed for the attack, which was to start thirty minutes after the Canadian attack. This attack became a grenade battle, "with which, however, the enemy were better and more plentifully supplied", and ultimately lasted several bloody days, the initial attack being unsuccessful.[64]

At this stage of the war, the army had numerous types of grenade.[65] The history of 47th Division narrates how there were about twelve types under trial, and "new

58 Nicholson, *The Canadian Army*, p.100.
59 Ibid., p.101.
60 Ibid., p.101.
61 Library and Archives Canada, RG9/4870: 2nd Canadian Brigade Headquarters War Diary.
62 Nicholson, *The Canadian Army*, p.101.
63 Library and Archives Canada, RG9/4916: 5/Canadian Battalion War Diary.
64 Anon, *History of the Post Office Rifles, 8th Battalion, City of London Regiment* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1919), p.8.
65 For further details, see John Mason Sneddon's chapter elsewhere in this volume.

Lieutenant John Smyth, 15th Ludhiana Sikhs, Lahore Division bringing a supply of grenades forward under fire on 18 May 1915. Smyth was awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery. Maintaining a supply of grenades for troops engaged in close combat proved a persistent problem during the Battle of Festubert. (*The War Illustrated*, August 1915)

experimental bombs came out almost every week. All were pretty bad, and the Army in France … fought mainly with the Battye bomb."[66] This required the fuse to be lit:

> where the bomber had to unwind a sticky tape, pull out safety nail, and then (with the fingers of his left hand, fingers always clumsy and often cold and wet, and frequently nervous in addition) take the cardboard lighter, wobbling on the top of two inches of pliable fuse and secured to the bomb with a bit of wire, to twist the upper thimble on the lower one.[67]

It really is a miracle that soldiers could successfully carry out all of these steps, in the heat of battle, at night, freezing cold, soaking wet and scared half to death; small wonder that the Mills bomb was to revolutionise British grenade use.

A further attack was launched at 11.30pm on 24 May by 3/Canadian Battalion from the Orchard, the aim being to capture 300 yards of enemy trench. Unfortunately, a six-hour bombardment failed to have the desired effect and the men were mown down in no man's land by four concealed German machine guns. The officer in charge at the Orchard reported that the left hand party had reached the trench and were bombing along it, but that no progress was being made to the right. By 11.50pm the machine

66 Alan H. Maude (ed), *The History of the 47th (London) Division, 1914-1919* (London: Amalgamated Press, 1922), p.17.
67 Ibid., p.18.

gun fire was so intense that it was not deemed worth the sacrifice to launch a further assault. This decision was reached knowing full well that without silencing these guns the original assaults were doomed. The battalion war diary records that the assault was called off due to a more intense artillery barrage being required, but that the artillery doubted their ability to fire accurately at night and the officer in charge of the trench mortars was loathe to open fire in darkness. Instead, the men had to endure a fierce shrapnel barrage from the German artillery.[68]

One last attack remained in the Battle of Festubert, another joint 47th Division and Canadian Division affair. A final innovation was introduced in the daytime artillery barrage for this assault; this was the first ever use of a kite observation balloon in battle by the BEF.[69] The attack was to be made by 142nd Brigade at 6.30pm on 25 May to seize trenches to the north-east of Givenchy. The Canadians, further north, were to attack at 9pm.[70] Within an hour 23/London Regiment and 24/London Regiment had advanced over 400 yards and taken the enemy trenches on a front of 1000 yards.[71] However, during the night the troops were subjected to a ferocious enfilade barrage that destroyed much of the trench line and caused many casualties, resulting once more in much of the line having to be abandoned.[72] The Canadian attack was carried out by a scratch unit formed of volunteers from the Canadian Cavalry Brigade in England.[73] Whilst they were successful in occupying enemy trenches, spearheaded by bombing parties from Lord Strathcona's Horse, they had become hopelessly confused in the darkness as to their whereabouts and had not in fact taken their objective.[74]

This assault was last throw of the dice for the British. The infantry were exhausted and the artillery had virtually denuded itself of ammunition. As a result, the battle was quietly closed down. Both sides consolidated their positions, licked their wounds and pondered the results. On 15 June 1915 Field Marshal Sir John French wrote his eighth despatch to the Secretary of State for War. In it he described the various stages of the attacks, Festubert being clearly seen as an extension to Aubers Ridge. He stated that: "I had now reason to consider that the battle, which was commenced by the First Army on the 9th May and renewed on the 16th, having attained for the moment the immediate object I had in view, should not be further actively proceeded with."[75] He went on to state:

> In the battle of Festubert above described the enemy was driven from a position which was strongly entrenched and fortified, and ground was won on a front of

68 Library and Archives Canada, RG9/4914: 3/Canadian Battalion War Diary.
69 Edmonds, *History of the Great War,* p.75.
70 Maude, *47th (London) Division,* p.19.
71 Nicholson, *The Canadian Army*, p.103.
72 Maude, *47th (London) Division,* p.20.
73 Nicholson, *The Canadian Army*, p.102.
74 Ibid., p.103.
75 The *London Gazette*, 10 July 1915.

Festubert May 1915: Seated below a captured portion of the German frontline, a British Tommy gazes across no man's land. (Editor's collection)

> four miles to an average depth of 600 yards. The enemy is known to have suffered very heavy losses, and in the course of the battle 785 prisoners and 10 machine guns were captured. A number of machine guns were also destroyed by our fire.[76]

Nowhere in the despatch does he say what the objectives of the attack were, other than to assist the French. As stated above, however, the *Official History* is quite clear that the objectives were also to widen the breach in the German lines and prevent the despatch of German reserves from the British front to the French attack at Vimy.

The *Official History*'s verdict was that the attack "had been tantalizing. Undertaken solely for the purpose of assisting the French, considerable success had been achieved." James Edmonds acknowledged that, "Units in some cases had reached the objectives assigned them, and the Germans had been compelled to withdraw from a strong position on which they had expended many months of labour."[77] Considering this had been achieved against a foe who was markedly superior in material resources – artillery, mortars, grenades and machine guns – there was some reason for satisfaction with the result. However, Jack Sheldon has provided a contrary view based on the research of German records. One of the objectives of the attack had been to deny the Germans the opportunity to move reserves to oppose the French by tying troops to fight the British. Sheldon states that the British claimed that Festubert was

76 Ibid.
77 Edmonds, *History of the Great War,* p.78.

a great success and that, "the operations at Festubert had brought to the battle every German who could be spared … If they represent a genuine British assessment then the compiler was deluding himself."[78] The Germans had had to summon only minor reinforcements, mainly from XIX Corps and II Bavarian Corps that could easily be spared.[79] Sheldon goes on to say that all the attack achieved was to, "capture a small piece of tactically worthless ground." He quotes Marshal Foch who wrote post-war, "The British Army launched a fresh attack on 16 May, on a frontage of three divisions. On the 18th our allies managed to force the German front line back 800 metres on a five kilometre front."[80] Faint praise indeed.

There is no doubt that, in the context of the wider war, the Battle of Festubert was a minor affair. It was an attack that, given the situation for the British at Ypres, would not have been made other than to assist the major partner in the alliance who was pressing for a show of support from the minor partner. There were no strategic benefits to this attack, other than to cement the alliance. It was fought when the British were desperate to maintain a hold on Ypres and when there was a shortage of ammunition both for artillery and infantry. In addition, the BEF was being pressured to send urgently needed ammunition to the Dardanelles. On 18 May the British artillery preparation had to do without any 4.5-inch howitzer involvement.[81] On 26 May the remaining number of rounds per type of gun numbered from nil to just forty; the stocks really had been laid bare.[82]

However, the battle demonstrated that the British Army was slowly learning its lessons. At Festubert the artillery was appreciated as being of considerable importance, the short, 'intense' barrage of Aubers Ridge had failed and the British substituted a longer, more methodical approach of the type that became the norm for the majority of the war. The artillery fire plan tried to deceive the enemy into thinking an attack was imminent with short, sharp bursts. For the first time in the war the British tried a large scale night attack. It was unfortunate that an attempt by the Indian Corps to confuse the enemy backfired on the attacking troops by simply serving to put the enemy on the alert, thus leading to the failure of the attack by the Meerut Division and part of 5th Brigade, but this local failure does not invalidate the overall method. Successful tactical measures from earlier battles were used again, in the shape of the bridges used to cross the dykes and ditches characteristic of the area. Early attempts were made to overcome tactical communicational problems, such as communicating by using lamps and torches. Paddy Griffith has offered a fair assessment of the army at this stage of the war:

78 Jack Sheldon, *The German Army on the Western Front 1915*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2012) Kindle Edition, loc. 3822.
79 Ibid., loc. 3822.
80 Ibid., loc. 3840.
81 Edmonds, *History of the Great War,* p.78.
82 Ibid., p.77.

> The BEF of 1915 started to make its own serious tactical experiments for the offensive. In the course of the small but fierce battles of … Festubert … there grew up at least a rough outline understanding of what ought to be done. Artillery fire plans rose to major prominence among the infantry's concerns, especially the question of their precise timing and destiny for which effective formulae were glimpsed but not yet grasped.[83]

However, once the initial attack had ended, for which much planning had been expended, the performance of the army in further attacks was not so impressive. Attacks were ordered at short notice, only to be cancelled, or rearranged. Attack times were staggered or lone attacks went ahead after neighbouring or supporting attacks failed to materialise. The constant flow of orders and counter orders resulted in communication trenches becoming clogged with men who could not attack; the German artillery was ruthlessly effective at taking advantage of such targets.

The mismatch between British and German artillery was a worrying feature of the battle. The Royal Artillery lacked sufficient heavy guns to take on their German counterparts. As a result British troops who had managed to fight their way into the enemy position were ferociously shelled, often to the point that they were forced to abandon their hard won gains. Furthermore a lack of high explosive shells for Royal Artillery field guns meant that later attacks were supported almost entirely by shrapnel shells which, whilst useful for wire cutting, were unsuitable for demolishing German parapets or strongpoints.

The BEF sustained 16,500 casualties in the battle between 15 and 25 May.[84] Small gains had been made but, given the strategic considerations that had prompted the battle, it is misleading to measure success in terms of ground taken. The British had shown to the French that they were prepared to fight, sustain casualties and endure what was, by the standards of mid-1915, a prolonged offensive. They had not drawn off huge reserves from the Germans in front of the French and they had not inflicted severe casualties on the defenders. Yet they were progressing; they were learning and they were willing to innovate. This was still a new form of warfare, especially for the BEF, and they still did not have the numbers of men or the material to wage it properly: but they were taking steps along that long, bloody road that would finally lead to victory. Festubert would serve as one of the many stepping stones that would ultimately turn the BEF into the formidable force of later years.

83 Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front, the British Army's Art of Attack 1916–18*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) p.53.

84 Edmonds, *History of the Great War,* p.76.

11

"Seven Days in Hell"[1] The 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment at the Battle of Festubert, May 1915

Adrian Gregson

The broad details of the Battle of Festubert in May 1915 have already been described in this volume. This chapter examines the battle from the perspective of a single battalion – the 1/7th King's Liverpool Regiment. For one private soldier of the battalion, taking part in his first major action since arrival in France, Festubert was nothing less than "Seven Days in Hell". The vast majority of material in this chapter comes from accounts provided by the men themselves, usually in the form of letters home, providing a unique reflection on their experiences at Festubert. Their participation in this battle marked them out in the future, when new drafts started to dilute some of the old county regiments, as 'veterans', a badge they wore with pride both during and after the war.

One significant feature of the early battles of the Great War was the detailed reports which were available to the public at home. Largely these came from letters sent back by soldiers either to their families who subsequently passed them on to the local paper or stories sent directly to the newspapers themselves. These first hand accounts, mainly from the ranks rather than officers, were often raw and direct. The increase in the numbers of educated men who formed the volunteer Territorial battalions that were brought into action in the spring of 1915 caused a comparable increase in the first hand reports appearing in the local press. The Battle of Festubert is a good example of this, as Territorial battalions from Lancashire were integrated into the Regular divisions employed in the attack.

1 James Cook correspondence 21st May 1915: Captain James Watson Cook MC and bar, from a solicitors' family in Southport, wrote home of his experiences in 1/7th King's. As Private Cook No. 2388, he served in 8 Platoon, B Company and later in the Lewis Gun Section, until he returned to England for his commission in September 1916. Access to this private correspondence was provided by his daughter.

A group of men from 1/7th King's, presumably the 'Formby Company'.
(*Formby Times*, 17 April 1915, p.3)

In March 1915, the 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment arrived in France and spent some short time being assimilated into the 2nd Division before their first major operations in May 1915. For this battalion, and for the home community of Southport, its recruiting base, the Battle of Festubert became a significant element of the war experience and their community identity.

Seventh Battalion landed in two parties – officers and most of the men on the ship the *Golden Eagle* and the rest on the *Manchester Importer* – on 8 March 1915. Nothing but a small item in the local press heralded their arrival.[2] The first letter to appear in the *Southport Guardian*, from Private Carl Purser, C Company, the son of a local councillor, writing on 14 March, described his crossing in the cattle boat, 200 men and 300 horses, followed by marching in snow and bitter cold, a train journey in cattle trucks, packed like herrings and not being settled in one place until the end of the following week.[3]

At home, local people remained linked to the war effort. Local councils were engaged in the recruiting campaign for Territorial volunteers, responding to Lord Derby's request for open air meeting facilities and speakers from the Council[4] and in the establishment of a munitions factory in the Cunard properties in Bootle.[5] The Battle of Neuve Chapelle (10 to 12 March 1915), was soon in the headlines, although the heavy casualties sustained by 1st King's were not made public until over a week

2 *Southport Visiter* 9th March 1915 p.6.
3 *Southport Guardian* 20th March 1915 p.7. Purser's commentaries developed into him being an unofficial 'war correspondent' for the newspaper.
4 Bootle County Borough Minutes Volume XXXII 5th May 1915; LUD7 Litherland Urban District Council Minutes 3rd May 1915.
5 B4/44 Cunard Executive Board Minutes April-July 1915; *History of the Ministry of Munitions* Vols. I-XII Harvester Press Ltd. Hassocks 1976 Vol. VIII Part II p.108.

later.[6] By early April, some of the newly established nursing facilities on Merseyside were taking in the wounded from Neuve Chapelle.[7]

The 1/7th Battalion's War Diary noted their progress in the first few days from Le Havre to Vendin lez Bethune.[8] The battalion spent the next few weeks assimilating, gaining experience and training, usually operating as companies, attached to different Regular units.[9] Rifle exercises, trench digging, inspections, drill and filling sandbags were the routines for the first ten days.

Lieutenant Sydney Marriott was company commander of B Company and wrote a series of letters home to his wife, father, brother and other family members.[10] News of the equipment shortages that dogged the army came in Marriott's letter of 12 March 1915 to his father, noting that the battalion would not be used as a whole until they had all been issued with the modern short service rifle.[11]

However, some of the battalion did see action almost immediately. On the night of 17 March, while attached to the Guards, B Company were digging a communication trench and C Company filling sandbags in no man's land, when they were shelled by German artillery. One man was killed, and another died of wounds.[12] Private Griffiths mentioned it in a letter home, published ten days later.[13] Marriott, whose company was involved, told his father they had been building a sandbag fort at the Brickstacks, Cuinchy, when a German flare went up, and noted that Private Webb was the first man in the battalion to be killed.[14] By the time the incident had reached the *Southport Guardian* however, this brief encounter had grown in the telling into a

6 *Southport Guardian* 20th March 1915 p.7.
7 356 WES 16/1(48) WLTAF Nursing Services Committee 24th March 1915.
8 The National Archives (Hereafter TNA) WO95/136, 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary 8th – 12th March 1915.
9 TNA WO95/1360, 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary 12th – 30th March 1915; WO95/1352, 6th Brigade War Diary 14th – 31st March 1915; *Southport Visiter* 15th May 1915 p.2; *Southport Visiter* 18th May 1915 p.4.
10 Museum of Liverpool Life, King's Regiment Collection, 1984.321: War diary of Sydney Marriott 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment. A copy also also resides at the Liddle Collection, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds. Hereafter 'Marriott'. Marriott started the war as a pre-war territorial officer, and by the end of 1915, he was in command of the battalion and remained until the middle of the battles of the Somme when he was sent home on medical grounds for a rest. When he returned to France it was with the 11th Battalion, Manchester Regiment.
11 Marriott correspondence 12th March 1915.
12 TNA: WO95/1360, 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary, 17th March 1915.
13 *Southport Guardian* 3rd April 1915 p.9.
14 Marriott correspondence 18th March 1915; Private R Webb, 2084, killed 17th March 1915, is buried in Bethune Town Cemetery. However, Private William Beveridge, 2087, was also recorded as killed on 17th March. His name appears on the Le Touret Memorial.

St. Patrick's Day baptism of fire![15] Rumours of it being a serious confrontation were quelled in subsequent reports.

Digging trenches at night had its dangers and throughout the war men were killed undertaking this duty. Each incident was examined, and the following day the company commanders of B and C Companies were interviewed by Lieutenant-General Charles Munro, Major-General Henry Horne and Brigadier-General Robert Fanshawe.[16] A few days later, on 23 March, in a similar incident, Sergeant Schofield was killed and an unnamed man and Lieutenant Smythe, injured.[17] According to Purser, it was simply misfortune that as the enemy artillery were trying to find the British guns, a stray shell landed where the Liverpools were digging.[18] Griffiths, who was part of the company and close by, said they were digging in the communication trench to make it deeper.[19] Private Brenchley reported that Schofield "was unrecognisable. His face was blown clean off."[20]

The nature of that revelation was inevitably in great contrast to the letter which Marriott sent to the family of Private Beveridge: "He was detailed with a party under my command to work outside the advanced trenches and was killed instantly, much to the regret of the whole company, as he was not only a good soldier, but a very straight man, and one in whom I placed great reliance."[21] Webb's date of death appears to be slightly inaccurate as he seems to have died later of wounds while Beveridge was clearly killed outright by a shell and has no grave; thus it is perhaps Beveridge who should be given the dubious honour of being the first man in the battalion to die for his country. Notwithstanding this, Marriott's real views on the causes of most deaths during March – though presumably not these two – were clear from his letter home on 28 March; he described the occasional casualties as "generally the man's own fault."[22] Marriott referred in particular to newly arrived men who wanted to take a look over the parapet.

Although the next month's War Diary is missing, it is clear from letters and newspaper reports that the rest of April 1915 was spent in a similar routine. Private Rymer wrote to his sister on 10 April about a mine blowing up one of the British trenches nearby – an event also reported by Private James Cook – although he noted that they

15 *Southport Guardian* 24th March 1915 p.5.
16 TNA WO95/1360, 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary, 18th March 1915; Marriott correspondence 18th March 1915: Major-General Horne was 2nd Division commander and Brigadier-General Fanshawe commanded 6th Brigade.
17 WO95/1360, 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary, 23rd March 1915.
18 *Southport Guardian* 3rd April 1915 p.9.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.; Note that Schofield's date of death was inaccurately recorded as being 22nd February, when in fact it was March, 1915. See *Soldiers Died in the Great War 1914–19: Part 13 – the King's (Liverpool Regiment)* (Polstead, JB Hayward & Son, 1989) p.56. Hereafter *Soldiers Died.*
21 *Southport Guardian* 27th March 1915 p.9.
22 Marriott correspondence 28th March 1915.

were now getting used to the shells. Fred Aldred described the many dead Germans lying on the battlefield, "some of them are in a fearful state – faces quite black"; Corporal Caswell of the Machine-Gun Section was badly injured by a shrapnel shell, while Sergeant Cotton described refugees being hit by shells in a village.[23]

When Private Cook came out of the trenches after the latest four-day spell on 29 April, he described it as "the hardest yet."[24] Other letters talk of billets, food, ruined villages and the awful weather, requiring the issue of goat and sheepskin coats – later withdrawn as being too cumbersome.[25] At the end of April the battalion's fighting strength was thirty officers and 940 men.[26]

One of the reasons for all the constant trench work was the need to prepare the battalion for the conditions of the Western Front. The War Diary reported that the battalion was allowed to hold a portion of the front line on its own on 31 March, although Marriott did not expect more until early April.[27] The tardiness in entrusting line and action solely to the Territorials appears to have been due to some disappointment amongst BEF commanders in France with the relevance and standard of training given to the men while they were in England.

The Regular divisions in France had been well prepared for the arrival of large numbers of the Territorial Force and seemed to greet it with some trepidation. In early February 1915, Lieutenant-General Sir William Robertson, Chief of Staff for the British Expeditionary Force, circulated a document highlighting the sorts of issues which divisional commanders needed to be aware of in advance of the Territorial Forces coming to France.[28] Although based on the few units who had arrived in France by that date, Robertson believed the advice was applicable to all newly-arriving units.[29] Special attention had to be paid to rifle and machine gun training, march discipline, entrenching, communications and platoon leading. Robertson identified a lack of proper sense of discipline, not maintaining the proper chains of command, boots being ill-fitting, a lack of understanding of the supply and ordering system, and poor instruction in billeting requirements as persistent problems.[30] Major-General Henry Horne, commanding 2nd Division, and a recipient of this circular, later made

23 *Southport Guardian* 21st April 1915 p.9; James Cook correspondence 12th April 1915.
24 James Cook correspondence 1st May 1915.
25 *Southport Visiter* 15th May 1915 pp. 2, 4 and 6.
26 TNA WO95/1285, 2nd Division War Diary, Report of Fighting Strength 24th April 1915.
27 TNA WO95/1360, 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary, 31st March 1915; Marriott correspondence 31st March 1915.
28 TNA WO 95/590, I Corps War Diary, Letter from Lieutenant-General Robertson Chief of Staff, to First Army Divisions 4th February 1915.
29 TNA WO162/7, Embarkation records.
30 TNA WO95/590, I Corps War Diary letter from Lieutenant-General Robertson Chief of Staff, to First Army Divisions 4th February 1915.

it clear to GHQ that the standards of training in England needed to be taken up with the appropriate authorities.[31]

The British Army tried to match up the Territorial battalions with related Regular counterparts as far as possible, presumably to secure an understanding and support mechanism for the former. Certainly, the relationship between the Territorials and the Regulars in the King's Regiment was highlighted by the mutually supportive references in letters home in relation to the Battle of Festubert itself.[32] The Terriers of the West Lancashire Division were assigned to Regular divisions with direct links to the local Regiments. The 5th and 7th King's were in 2nd (Regular) Division alongside the 1st King's. The 8th Battalion joined 4th and 5th King's Own, and 5th Loyal North Lancashires in 51st Division. The 9th King's were in the 1st Division, with the 1st Loyals. The 10th King's (Liverpool Scottish) had been in Flanders since the previous autumn and by now were fully integrated in 3rd Division; they were joined by 4th South Lancashires and 2nd Loyals, while in the 4th Division the 1st King's Own and 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers were joined by 5th South Lancashires. Although the 55th Territorial Division was not reconstituted until 1916, the individual units were still in close touch with their neighbours from home, as part of the deliberate policy of support and training for these fresh units.[33]

The immediate impression of the battalion had been given in the Brigade War Diary, 13 March 1915 – "They look a very useful lot."[34] After only a few days, however, the appraisal was less glowing and, despite the fact that the CO reported that on 17 March they "had all done very well under trying circumstances",[35] 2nd Division was less impressed. Brigadier-General Fanshawe, commanding at brigade level and therefore a lot closer to the troops than his superiors, felt that both 5th and 7th King's were "satisfactory" but that the junior officers needed greater confidence in themselves, and for them to improve discipline and training as a result. He also commented that the

31 TNA WO95/590, I Corps War Diary letter from Major-General Horne, 2nd Division, to GOC I Corps 23rd March 1915.

32 Additionally, *Southport Guardian* 24th April 1915, p.6 included an anonymous letter: 'Our first line battalion are with us … Brave is not the word for it. They are a lot of dare-devils … The Germans know them as the 'cast-iron' regiment. In fact … brigade known as the cast iron brigade'. This is particularly interesting in the light of Tilsley's use of the epithet later to describe 55th Division, which did not include 1st King's, but did include 5th and 7th King's. See V.W. Tilsley, *Other Ranks* (Cobden-Sanderson, London 1931) p.4.

33 TNA WO162/7, Embarkation records; Becke, A.F. Major *Order of Battle of Divisions Part 1 Regular Divisions HMSO* (repr. Ray Westlake, London 1989; original 1936) pp.36-63; Morris, P. "Leeds and the amateur military tradition: the Leeds Rifles and their antecedents, 1859-1918" Unpublished PhD thesis University of Manchester 1980 p.494 Hereafter "The Leeds Rifles".

34 TNA WO95/1352, 6th Brigade War Diary, 13th March 1915.

35 Marriott correspondence 19th March 1915.

senior officers were slow. Nevertheless, he did feel able to declare them fit for the front line.[36]

However, this view was overruled by Major-General Horne's interpretation of the report for First Army Corps, which said that neither battalion was immediately fit for the front, although they were being introduced gradually. His response was based largely on their smartness and ability in drill, rather than their prospective abilities in combat.[37] Typically for the Regular command, the lower standard of drill and the more casual approach to smartness from the Territorials were significant factors. Nevertheless, Horne did find the Battalion CO, Lieutenant Colonel Stott, young and active with a good command of his officers and men. His most severe criticism was for the training methods in England:

> bearing in mind that these two battalions have been embodied for seven months, the standard of training is very disappointing … the battalion has been employed for some months guarding railways, etc. duties entailing many detachments and leaving little room for drills and exercises … drill and manoeuvre leave much to be desired. Little attention appears to be devoted in England to cultivate a smart and soldierlike bearing and to enforce strict discipline and cleanliness. This is noticeable, not only in these territorial battalions, but in the case of drafts sent to regular battalions.[38]

Horne was obviously less interested in musketry ability than having smart soldiers in his division. The difference between Regular and Territorial style and ethos stood out very plainly, and the comments which seemingly show an inferiority complex amongst some of the Territorials in relation to the Regulars, were clearly the result of this kind of damning criticism. One can only imagine the regime which meant that "these two battalions have improved out of recognition during the short time they have been with the division."[39]

Private Purser gave his own appraisal of the battalion in a letter at the end of April 1915:

> So far I think the 7th Kings have come off very lucky, because they have been hard at it all the time. They have already gained a good name as 'real workers'. There isn't much of the 'swank' element in our battalion and we all try and act together, which accounts for the work getting done properly. Of course, I think

36 TNA WO95/590, I Corps War Diary Report of Brigadier-General Fanshawe 6th Brigade, for GOC I Corps 22nd March 1915.
37 TNA WO95/590, I Corps War Diary Report from Major-General Horne 2nd Division, for GOC I Corps 23rd March 1915.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.

> there are many things which may be improved upon, but 'red tape' always has and always will exist, and it's no use saying more on the subject.[40]

Other Territorial battalions fared much the same. By 6 April 1915, the Post Office Rifles still had "a great deal to learn" and were "not trained in working at night"; 6th Battalion, City of London Rifles needed Regulars to left and right, but could hold the line with such assistance and supervision; while 7th Battalion London Regiment were however, quite competent to go into the line.[41] A consistent complaint was made about officers – in 15th (Civil Service) Battalion, and the 17th, 18th, and 20th Battalions, London Division, they were inclined to "sit around and wait for a job to be done, lacked command, and required further work with the Regulars."[42] In this context, 7th King's were on a reasonable par with members of one of the crack Territorial divisions.[43] The general appraisal of needs of the brigade kept this and other battalions hard at it through April – as Cook testified – until adjudged able to provide support at Aubers Ridge on 9 May.

The Brigade War Diary made reference to the various aspects of training and movements of the battalions in the early days of May 1915 including forming part of the Corps Reserve for the attack by 1st Division on 9 May.[44] One correspondent reported that 1/7th Battalion had "been acting as a 'Flying Unit', moving from place to place at a moment's notice … attacking all along the line."[45] The War Diary reported the failure at Aubers Ridge of the first attack at 7am and also the final effort at 6.30pm, by which time the brigade had moved up to support 1st Division at Richebourg St.Vaast. The brigade was ordered into attack, but this was delayed by the blocking of trenches and approaches by wounded and returning troops from the 1st Division. "This delay was just as well as the attack was cancelled. The orders to this effect barely reached the Brigade in time."[46] The War Diary gave a very clear indication of the confusion and error which could so easily have led to many more casualties, a situation replicated at many stages over the subsequent three and a half years. Orders were issued to attack on the 10th at 3pm, but this was cancelled at 10.30am and the troops returned to billets.[47]

This incident also shows the different levels of information available to brigade and battalion commanders. While brigade knew the details of the attack and the cause of its

40 *Southport Guardian* 28th April 1915 p.9.
41 TNA WO95/1285, 2nd Division War Diary Report 6th April 1915.
42 TNA WO95/1285, 2nd Division War Diary Report 16th April 1915.
43 For example, the London Division, according to Paddy Griffith. *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack 1916-18* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994) p.80 and Morris "The Leeds Rifles", p.494.
44 TNA WO95/1352, 6th Brigade War Diary 30th April – 9th May 1915.
45 *Southport Guardian* 22nd May 1915 p.7.
46 TNA WO95/1285, 2nd Division War Diary 9th May 1915.
47 TNA WO95/1352, 6th Brigade War Diary 10th May 1915.

cancellation, as far as the battalion was concerned they simply "Stood by all day" between 10 -11 April and then "Moved off to fresh billets."[48] For the men, there was a mixture of relief and disappointment not to be called on. Cook allayed his mother's anxiety, though, when he wrote the battalion had not participated "yet".[49] Corporal Wainwright wrote at length of the day spent marching to reserve positions, eating dinner and tea, marching back and forth, leaving packs and donning capes, only to be returned to billets with unfulfilled excitement.[50]

Photograph of 1/7th King's, allegedly taken during combat, and printed on the front page of the *Daily Sketch*, 1 June 1915. (Author's collection)

The Battle of Festubert[51]

Festubert needs to be seen in its context as the third in a series of attempts in the La Bassee area to break through the enemy lines in the spring of 1915, in support of the attacks being made by the French Tenth Army to the south.[52] Griffith noted that the battles in the La Bassee area in early 1915 were part of a gradual adaptation and understanding of the tactics needed to secure a breakthrough.[53] The BEF was slowly learning how to integrate artillery, machine guns, trench mortars, smoke, signals and aircraft, but this understanding was patchy, and would not begin to come to fruition until the Battle of Loos in September.

48 TNA WO95/1360, 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary 11th May 1915

49 James Cook correspondence 10th May 1915.

50 *Southport Visiter* 15th May 1915 p.4.

51 See Robert Williams' chapter elsewhere in this volume for a full account of the Battle of Festubert.

52 Only one contemporary account from an eyewitness drew attention to the combined campaign: 'the best of all was that we cleared the way for further French advances on our right.' – Threlfall, TR *The Story of the King's (Liverpool) Regiment, formerly the 8th Foot* (London, Country Life, 1916), p. 169.

53 Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, p.53.

Militarily, the key aspect of the action is that it marked the first major British night attack of the war.[54] Despite this novelty, little critical attention seems to have been given to this fact.[55] The idea had first been proposed as a way of renewing the stalled offensive against Aubers Ridge on 10 May 1915, when a night assault with the bayonet and no artillery preparation was suggested.[56] In the event there was no further action at Aubers on 10 May but the idea would become a key point of the offensive at the Battle of Festubert a few days later. Indeed, it is clear from First Army War Diary that the attack at Festubert should really be seen as a continuation of the Battle of Aubers Ridge, after a series of delays from 11 May.[57] It was hoped that an attack under cover of darkness would achieve an element of surprise and spare the infantry from the witheringly accurate fire that had caused such chaos on 9 May.

The assault would be by night across ground "now so well known, in order to gain a footing in the first two lines of the German trenches before dawn." After seizing the front line, however, 2nd Division's commander Henry Horne proposed to await daylight "as … obstacles … [would] dislocate further advance in the dark."[58] The three brigades of the 2nd Division would attack employing 10,000 men, including 6th Brigade and 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment in the first assault. This attack would be over 1,000 yards of waterlogged fields, muddy trenches and barbed wire to the first objective of La Quinque Rue.[59]

Originally, 6th Brigade were notified that the attack would be at night on 14 May.[60] However, the assault was postponed for 24 hours to allow the artillery additional time to pulverize the German defences and also to give some time for the wet and muddy ground over which the neighbouring 7th Division was due to advance across time to dry out.[61] The long bombardment was clearly vital to Haig, as he made several notes to this effect on Edmonds' draft chapter,[62] but it transpires that it had only continued for so long because the initial date was put back twenty-four hours due to the failure to

54 Charles Messenger, *Terriers in the Trenches: the Post Office Rifles at War 1914-1918* (Picton, Chippenham, 1982), p.18.

55 *The Official History* did not draw any particular attention to the fact. See J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium 1915*, Vol.2, (London, Macmillan, 1927), pp.40-77 (hereafter *Official History*).

56 WO95/155, First Army War Diary Conference notes, 9th May 1915.

57 WO95/155, First Army War Diary, 9th – 14th May 1915.

58 CAB44/20, Draft chapter on Festubert for the *Official History.*

59 A. Kearsey, *1915 Campaign in France: the battles of Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Loos considered in relation to the Field Service Regulations* (Uckfield, Naval and Military Press (reprint) [1929]), pp. 10-11 (Hereafter *1915 Campaign in France*); WO95/1285, 2nd Division War Diary, Battle Instructions 13th May 1915.

60 WO 95/591, I Corps War Diary, 10th – 15th May 1915.

61 WO95/1352, 6th Brigade War Diary, 14th May 1915. 7th Division had to make their attack in daylight as they were new to the area and so could not traverse the ground safely in darkness.

62 CAB44/20, Draft chapter on Festubert for the *Official History.*

hit the target effectively and preparation problems amongst the attack troops. Neither the *Official History* nor Haig's notes link the battles at Aubers and Festubert as closely as now appears to have been the case from evidence in the First Army War Diary.[63]

The events of 15 May were relayed home by a wide range of men in the 1/7th Battalion. Private Carl Purser showed that the significance of the barrage laid down by the British, and the German retaliation, was not lost on the troops, either in relation to the physical and mental effect on the soldiers, or to the need for more resources:

> Artillery may win the war; infantry will certainly be sufferers throughout, if they [the Germans] can afford to bombard as they have done this last few days it does not show much shortage, and for us to keep up with them, or rather, to get the better of them, we shall have to buck up and have less talk about shells and actually get on to the making.[64]

The *Southport Guardian* demonstrated part of the growing anxiety at the shortage of shells and guns, indicating an editorial line subtly against the government.

Most other correspondents seemed anxious simply to let their families know what it was like and their accounts are graphic, hardly sparing those at home from the worry over the danger their menfolk were in. Finn's study referred to a call in the *Formby Times* seeking letters from the front and the results were stark enough to demonstrate that, contrary to much historiography, people at home can hardly have failed to see the reality of battle.[65] The accounts of the artillery barrage before the attack, for instance, demonstrated the sheer powerlessness of the infantry. Private Erlam Greaves' comments about the Germans would equally apply to the British, although he was not going to admit it: "… our guns commenced their task of destroying the barbed wire entanglements in front of the German lines and the cannonade continued all through the day. The noise was simply awful and I do not know how the Germans stood it."[66] The immediate success of the attack seemed to show that at least the battery was able to clear a path for the infantry, though there was no specific mention of it in the reports. What is also clear from the letters is that men of different units talked to each other about the war, sharing stories and opinions. Private Dobson wrote about the bombardment that "the Regulars who were alongside us say they've never been under such hot fire",[67] while Arthur Butterworth noted that "The men in the artillery

63 WO95/155, First Army War Diary.
64 *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9.
65 M. Finn, 'The Realities of War' in *History Today,* Vol.52, No.8, August 2002, pp.26-31.
66 *Formby Times* 5th June 1915 p.5; *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7.
67 *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9; *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.6; *Waterloo and Crosby Herald* and *Formby, Bootle and Seaforth Gazette* 29th May 1915 p.5 (hereafter *Crosby Herald*).

say that Neuve Chapelle was dangerous, but that beat it."[68] Arthur's brother, Harold, wrote to tell his parents that "it was murder in the fire zone."[69]

The nature of the attack carried out by A and B Companies can be determined from a variety of sources. The official reports focused on tactics and events, justifying the actions and encouraging recruitment. The accounts from individual soldiers concentrated on the emotion of the experience, whether it was the bravery of their comrades or the pitiful appearance of their enemy. The battalion War Diary stated simply that "A & B Coys in attack, moved over parapet about 10.45pm & waited. Attack successful. German line carried."[70] Lieutenant-Colonel Louis Vaughan made particular reference to synchronising watches, as one of the problems at Aubers had been mistrust of officers' timekeeping.[71] The *Official History* stated that 6th Brigade advanced "at a silent walk with bayonets".[72] Conan Doyle later described the attack in positive terms: "in three minutes they had swarmed across the open and poured into the trenches."[73] In reaching the German support trenches, the objectives were met before dawn.

Descriptions of the battle from veterans provide a richer understanding of the experience. Two styles of soldiers' accounts are apparent from the newspapers – the description from afar by observers of this attack, and the accounts given by men from A and B Companies who took part. The observers' stories depict heroism and sacrifice: the attackers' tales belie their shock and fear and do not attempt to hide the realities of war. Despite, or perhaps because of, the more unsuccessful follow-up by C and D Companies in the morning, the emphasis of the reporting was on the opening attack, portraying it as a great bayonet charge rather than what had been referred to in the *Official History* as a silent walk.

The difference between a walk and a charge is partly explained by the restrained and sober reflection typical of the *Official History*. When the *Official History* was written around 1927, Festubert did not hold much significance in the context of the whole war, whereas the immediacy of the battle for the young men at the scene, writing only one or two days afterwards, was completely different. First hand reports suggest that there was a silent walk until the attackers were seen, at which point they charged on to the trenches. Private Ross wrote:

> The platoon I am in was the very first … over the parapet. We had 300 to 400 yards to go and at first we walked; soon, too soon, they saw us, star shells went up all round, rifles cracked, and machine guns went zip, zip, zip … All this time

68 *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7.
69 *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.6; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5.
70 WO95/1360, 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary, 15th May 1915.
71 WO95/1285, 2nd Division War Diary, 13th May 1915.
72 *Official History 1915* Vol. II p.58.
73 Arthur Conan Doyle, *The British Campaign in France and Flanders 1915*, (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1917), p.128.

> we had been advancing, and men had been falling; it was like going through a hailstorm, but the hailstones were hard bullets.[74]

Richard Tyrer, a private from A Company, wrote

> We made a bayonet charge … and captured two lines of trenches by 1am. It was an awful thing charging amid bullets from left and right, so many of our brave lads fell, and I am exceedingly sorry to tell you young Bobby Mercer was accidentally shot. Arthur Band is very badly wounded. Dean's boys, Erlam Greaves and Sandy Bourhill are all safe and well.[75]

Nonetheless, the experience was a defining one, as Private Farrington reported: "Our company was the first over the parapet and led the way onto the battlefield. To be more correct, I should say 'slaughter house'."[76]

Private Greaves, A Company, wrote that:

> no sooner had we got over the parapet than the Germans commenced rapid fire on us … I can tell you it was not very palatable waiting there with thousands of little pills whizzing over your head … we were encouraged by one of our sergeants who kept shouting, "Come on the King's, avenge the Lusitania"[77] … The Germans do not like the bayonet … they came running out of their trench crying "Mercy, mercy, Comrade boon" … It was a horrible sight the next morning, looking across to our lines, the ground strewed with dead and wounded. It is a sight I do not want to see again. If I have to witness such a spectacle I pray to God He will bring me safely through.[78]

James Cook described it as "a dream … there must have been divine help on our side".[79]

Private George Kerr wrote from his hospital bed:

> We had at least 500 yards to go before we reached their trench. Well we started advancing on our stomachs for about half-way when the Germans spotted us with their star-lights. Well, that did it. They set their Maxim guns on us; also rifle fire, shells and bombs. My word, I thought we would never get through it …

74 *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7.
75 S*outhport Visiter* 29th May 1915 p.5.
76 *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.6; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5.
77 The *Lusitania* was a Cunard passenger liner sunk by torpedoes on 7th May, on its way back to its home port of Liverpool. Many of its crew were Liverpool people and there was a strong anti-German reaction, particularly in the northwest.
78 *Formby Times* 5th June 1915 p.5; *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7.
79 James Cook correspondence 21st May 1915.

2898 Private Bobby Mercer, killed on 17 May 1915. Mercer is commemorated on the Le Touret Memorial, Panels 6-8. (*Formby Times*, 5 June, 1915, p.5)

2175 Private Robert Balshaw, who died of wounds on 20 May 1915. Balshaw is buried at Boulogne Eastern Cemetery, grave VIII.D.31. (*Formby Times*, 5 June, 1915, p.5)

> We dashed into the trench with a loud cheer. There was moaning and groaning, and clatter of bayonets. It was awful, the blood was flying all over; the Germans were crying for mercy. Of course there was heavy loss on our side as well.[80]

In contrast, Private Thomas Murray, Lieutenant Adams' servant and well out of the fighting, was typical of the other strand of writing when he wrote to his mother:

> The night was pitch dark except from the fire from bursting shells … Over our trench crept No.4 platoon, under Lieut. Adams, with the platoons of the other regiments (from KRR, 1st King's, Staffords, Berks, 5th King's) … Our men had crept within 100 yards of the Germans, who were 600 yards from our trenches … Alas! they were spotted. Out from dozens of Maxims came the terrible bullets, and shell began bursting round them. It was hell on earth but on they went through the murderous fire. Our men were cut down like grass … It was here poor Bob Balshaw was killed. He died fighting like a lion. Poor Lieut. Adams was shot on the trench, urging his platoon on, who mostly follow him …" Don't forget the Lusitania" … Our men drove the Germans out. The 1st King's got at

80 *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7.

> them. They would not have the bayonet, and started coming into us in hundreds under the white flag.[81]

Murray's story was similar to the others, but lacked the passion of the combatant, substituting it for something more Kiplingesque.

The letters contained military and tactical information that was left uncensored. Private Norman Heaps, 13 Platoon, D Company, watched A and B Companies prepare to attack: "each man being as lightly equipped as possible and with white cloths attached to their hats in order to distinguish each other in the darkness", although the *Official History* referred to patches on the front and back of tunics, not hats.[82] Heaps' matter-of-fact description of preparations immediately prior to an attack seemed tinged with regret at not being involved and coloured with respect for those who were.

The *Crosby Herald* relied almost entirely on letters for its reporting of the action, under a headline of "7th King's in Action".[83] However, it did carry the 'Eyewitness' account, from the British Headquarters three miles to the rear and this makes for interesting comparisons with the foregoing letters:

> May 16th … The landscape stretching before me was typical of this part of France. Through innumerable thickets and plantations of trees peeped out red roofs of houses and cottages, while further away on the skyline the chimneys of coal mines in the Lille district reared their heads up against the blue sky … over Festubert hung a dark pall of smoke that seemed to grow in intensity. As I watched the shells were bursting the whole time – a dazzling flash, a cloud of smoke, and then a dull boom. Green fumes of lyddite mingled with a black cloud produced by 'Jack Johnsons' and over all screamed shrapnel, leaving a little speck of white as it burst. It seemed impossible that anything could live in such a storm.

The communique went idyllically on:

> Along the roads leading up to the trenches, lorries of all descriptions carrying stores, and above all ammunition, could be seen, while the severe nature of the fighting was testified by the Red Cross wagons that occasionally passed along to the casualty stations in the rear of the firing line … Back in the town, only a few miles from the firing line, everything was going on as usual, only the passing of a few Red Cross cars laden with wounded showed that an engagement was proceeding so near. [The reporter described the convoy of prisoners from the

81 *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9; *Southport Visiter* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Formby Times* 29th May 1915 p.5.
82 *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5.
83 Ibid.

> 57th Westphalian Regiment]: Their uniforms, it is true, were new and good, but the men themselves were almost without exception of the poorest physique, and marched along with downcast heads … Besides the keen, well-cut faces of their bronzed guard they showed up in very poor contrast.[84]

This last description of the British and German appearance is interesting, given the wintry weather which had been experienced on the front up until this point.

Problems grew as day dawned on 16 May, when 7th Battalion War Diary reported that reinforcements "were wiped out by machine gun fire."[85] After describing the charge by A and B Companies, while he was in reserve, Purser (C Company) wrote that D Company had to reinforce the attack at 5am. This necessitated half the company crossing about 360 yards in broad daylight and under a hail of enfilade machine gun fire as trenches to the right flank had not been taken. As the dead and wounded piled up in the communication sap, the major stopped any further attempts. A new move was made at 11am by C Company, moving one platoon at a time in broad daylight. "It was a brave attempt, and every man who went over knew it was almost a certainty of death or being wounded." After four platoons – 180 men – had tried and failed, Purser's platoon was next, but again the machine guns cut terrible losses into C and D Companies.[86]

Purser's account was complemented by Marriott, writing to his father:

> C and D were ordered to charge in broad daylight – it was a mad idea and I knew the result before we started … The first platoon went over under McClelland … They were mown down. Then the 2nd platoon was mown down. I was just going with the 3rd when the order came to stop us.[87]

Marriott's independent and unpublished account corresponds with Purser and lends weight to the rest of his account. It is interesting to note that the lieutenant called the idea mad, while the private thought it brave. This may be explained by the fact that Purser knew his letters were being published while Marriott wrote purely to his family. This disparity may also reflect the differences between the informed and experienced view of an officer who, while not dispassionate, was perhaps more objective and that of the enthusiastic volunteer seeing his first taste of real action. As a cub journalist, Purser's account is strong on the bravery and tenacity in the face of the enemy, tinged with humour when reporting his involvement in carrying ammunition and rations up to the front, across shell holes, mud and dead bodies – "I was covered

84 *Crosby Herald* 22nd May 1915 p.2.
85 WO95/1360, 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary, 16th May 1915.
86 *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9.
87 Marriott correspondence 21st May 1915.

from head to foot with mud, and had a huge biscuit tin to carry. Swear! I am afraid I cursed frightfully."[88]

Another account came from Private Heap, D Company:

> We were moved along the line, relieved of our packs, the heaviest and unessential part of our equipment and each two men took hold of a box of ammunition, with a third man behind them. We then moved out through an opening in the barricade. We then quickly learnt what the third men had been sent with us for, as a Maxim gun was trained on us and a number of men were hit … Just before daybreak word was passed along to "dig yourselves in" as the trench had been practically demolished by our artillery during the day. We had with us our entrenching tools, the blades of which are only about four inches square – not very promising implements with which to make a hole big enough to conceal yourself. However, we set to, and I assure you I never worked harder in my life than I did in that half-hour. At any rate, by daybreak, I was well below the level of the ground[89]

Early on 17 May a number of Germans attempted to surrender, but were shelled by artillery. Several letters refer to these events, which is noted in the *Official History*: "[At 7am on the 17th] Germans retired with white flags and ran unarmed towards the trench of 1/7th King's Liverpool, east of Chocolat Meunier Corner."[90] The *Official History* notes that Germans fired shells on them, probably thinking they were British as they thought their own trenches had by now been evacuated. The British artillery also shelled them, and none made it to the trench. Shortly afterwards, another 450 tried to surrender, and despite receiving further fire were apparently more successful.

The correspondents had mixed feelings about these men, ranging from Arthur Butterworth, C Company, who wrote to his father of "The cowards, after turning machine guns on our wounded, hoisted the white flag. Germans came running towards our trench … and one of our shells burst right in the midst of them and that was the last of them";[91] to the rather more sympathetic line of Richard Tyrer:

> We got about 500 prisoners. It was a great sight to see them waving white flags and running to our trenches … Some of them were wounded and we helped them to the dressing station. They would not do that for us, but that is where the Britisher shows humanity, a thing in which the Germans lack.[92]

88 *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9.
89 *Southport Visiter* 5th June 1915 p.12.
90 *Official History 1915*, Vol.II, p.66.
91 *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7.
92 *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.11; *Southport Visiter* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Formby Times* 29th May 1915 p.5.

For others, the event seemed to catch the imagination with increasing excitement and exaggeration. Private W.H. Wright was in the captured trench and saw Germans surrendering: "They came running across the field like rabbits, with their hands up and waving white flags."[93] An unnamed officer whose letter was printed in the Bootle paper wrote:

> we suddenly saw a forest of white flags go up over their trenches to our right, and they came streaming in hundreds over the parapet and made a bolt for our original front line opposite them. Our guns dropped any number of them before their fire could be stopped.[94]

Perhaps Private Sharrocks summed up the views of the men, keen to get at the enemy, but overruled not just by an officer but by an apparent morality of the sort which ordinary men on either side of no-man's-land seemed to feel for their opposite numbers caught in the war machine: "hundreds of Germans came rushing towards us with their hands up … We felt inclined to shoot them, but our officers would not let us … They looked a dejected lot. Some of our chaps were carrying wounded Germans …"[95]

An "eyewitness" quoted by Threlfall appeared to get the account of the capture of prisoners confused with the success of the attack:

> The Germans made a desperate attempt to hold their ground … but it was all useless. Once that tide of angry Liverpool men had got going there was nothing made in Germany strong enough to stop it … They seemed to lose all heart. Some threw away their rifles. Others tried to run, only to be shot or bayoneted. None of them seemed to have the gumption to surrender, until one of their officers stepped forward and held up his hands. At that signal hands went up all round and then the place that had been the scene of so much of the noise and roar and madness of battle only a few minutes before was quiet as a Quakers' meeting.[96]

As far as the local newspapers were concerned, the capture of the Germans was a coup for the battalion, and an important small scale victory in itself. For the professional soldier, it was an event of little significance. Marriott only gave it a passing mention in his letter. After the first group had run out and a shell landed in the middle, Marriott told his father another "500-600 came out with their hands up. They were full of watches, money, cigars which they gave to our men as they came in."[97] The

93 *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.11.
94 *Bootle Times* 28th May 1915 p.5.
95 *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.11.
96 Threlfall *The Story of the King's* pp. 167-169.
97 Marriott correspondence 21st May 1915.

7th King's diary referred to fatigue parties found to supply rations to 1st King's, burial parties, and the continuous shelling from German lines. The battalion was relieved during the night of 19/20 May under heavy shelling.[98]

According to the subsequent report in 6th Brigade Diary, 1/7th King's (referred to in the report as 7/8th using the old nomenclature for the Regiment – 8th Foot) swung a little to the left of their objective and did not actually take it, although this was not known at the time.[99] In fact, Private Cook claimed that in taking three lines of trenches, they accomplished what had been "deemed improbable" – perhaps feedback of information to the troops was not very good.[100] The report went on to note that machine gun fire and shelling were heavy and attempts to move other units up to the captured trenches were fruitless, though by daylight on 16 May men in ones and twos were able to get to the German line. With these trenches thick with troops, it was fortunate that German shelling was primarily directed against the original British trenches, although these were also congested.[101] The 7th Battalion were amongst those withdrawn to British trench breastworks on the night of 16/17 May, while 1st King's took the objective originally thought to have been secured by 7th Battalion.

Reliefs from the Guards and Sirhind Brigades took over the attack on 18 May, leaving the line to be held by 1st and 7th King's only, and they were withdrawn on 19 May. According to the report, nearly 1,000 yards of enemy trenches were won and 200 prisoners taken. The artillery cooperation was described as "very satisfactory", but casualties were around 2,500 for all ranks. Brigade War Diary reported that the forming up of the men for the attack in successive lines outside the parapet, and pushing men out gradually as flares subsided, had been successfully carried out. The brigade report clearly felt the operation had been reasonably successful.[102]

A number of writers including Private Dobbs, claimed that a passing general praised the battalion.[103]

98 WO95/1360, 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary, 20th May 1915.

99 WO95/1352, 6th Brigade War Diary Extracts from Narrative of Operations, from night 15th/16th to 19th May 1915.

100 James Cook correspondence 21st May 1915.

101 WO95/1352, 6th Brigade War Diary Extracts from Narrative of Operations, from night 15th/16th to 19th May 1915.

102 Ibid.

103 Private Sherwood also felt it worth mentioning when he wrote home: "We were praised by the General. No doubt you will see something of it in the papers by now", *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9. The *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7 printed an extract from a letter from an officer which read that "The Brigadier is very pleased with us, and said to a sergeant of ours, 'Well, your regiment has made a name for itself anyway.'" Corporal Wainwright, who also wrote to the Mayor, was wounded in the charge. In his letter to his parents he concluded "my section were advancing like heroes, through a downpour of shells and bullets, and the Liverpool Terriers, if never before, made a name for themselves. To be in the first line of charge was a thing never expected by our boys. The way the good old regulars charged and encouraged our chaps I shall never forget." *Southport Guardian* 22nd May 1915 p.7.

> We came through with the highest honours … we fought a great battle and came out with flying colours … Of course there were more regiments in it besides ours … They all spoke well of us. The general gave us a good name, and he waved his hand to us as we were leaving the village.[104]

Marriott's letters home confirmed what had appeared to be a rather anecdotal claim.[105] Subsequent gallantry awards also appeared to confirm that view of the hierarchy with the award of a Military Cross, a DCM and several officers and NCOs Mentioned in Dispatches.[106]

As related elsewhere in this volume, the *Official History* summed up the results of the Battle of Festubert as "tantalizing".[107] Objectives had been reached by some units, but the British attack had been stalled by a combination of battlefield confusion, lack of sufficient fire support and the tenacity of the German defenders. The lack of British equipment for close quarter fighting, particularly grenades, was especially notable. The *Official History* put it down to "British unpreparedness for war" – a verdict warmly welcomed by Haig in 1927 who informed Edmonds "I am glad you put this in" adding "I hope that the British people will realise what 'unpreparedness for war' cost the Empire in flesh and blood."[108]

However, in early 1915 Haig was unwilling to tailor his plans, which had included continuing the assault at Aubers Ridge for instance, to fit the resources available. He has been criticized for seeking unrealistic, overambitious objectives in pursuit of a decisive battle.[109] Kearsey pointed out, however, that to await better preparation would have saved casualties but would not have fitted into the general plan of combining with the French.[110] The failure to knock out German machine-gun positions did contribute to the heavy casualties on the second and third days, and the delay in being able to renew the attack caused congested trenches which were prone to enemy shelling. More effective planning and staff work might have dissipated these shortfalls.

After the battle, as if to reinforce the feeling of being on a long and exciting excursion, some soldiers were keen to collect souvenirs and send them home as proof that they had been there when the 7th King's made their charge. As noted above, surrendering Germans handed over some of their possessions. Private Sharrocks "got a German helmet, a belt, a knife, a cigarette case, a water bottle etc. One chap got a

104 *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.6.
105 Marriott correspondence 21st May 1915.
106 Threlfall *The Story of the King's*, pp.192-197.
107 *Official History 1915*, Vol. II p.76-77.
108 CAB44/20, Haig Comments on draft chapter on Festubert for the *Official History.*
109 N. Lloyd 'With Faith and Without Fear': Sir Douglas Haig's Command of First Army During 1915' in the *Journal of Military History* Vol.71 No.4 October 2007, pp.1051-1076.
110 Kearsey, *Campaign in France*, pp. 11-12.

cat-o-nine-tails."[111] James Cook had a water bottle and belt, but found the helmets too bulky to carry.[112] Private Farrington sent his sister a rather gruesome souvenir:

> One of the Germans came running in my direction. I let him have a couple in memory of 'Lusi' and other things besides. I have got his helmet. I am going to send it to you along with some more souvenirs. If you get it all right you can put it in your shop window.[113]

At least Arthur Butterworth recognised what was going on when he wrote "I think the horrors of war make one unusually callous. During the scramble it was most amusing to see the men looking for souvenirs. Helmets were the order of the day, though bayonets, buttons, watches, and even clocks came into our hands". Private Greaves was not one of them – "I was only too glad it was all over."[114]

One of the immediate after-effects of the action was illness. On 24 May Private Cook reported that he had had diarrhea for the last three days and put this down to the change in type of food and the need for rationing while they were in the attack, together with the rain, lack of sleep and having no change of clothing. He wrote: "Xcuse writing (sic) but I have to keep still & lie on my back. There are lots of others with the same complaint". He had received a bullet through his hat at the battle and referred to resting his shattered nerves, which likely contributed to his condition.[115] Again, the home community should not have been in any doubt as to the conditions under which their sons were fighting. For instance, Drummer Orme reported:

> I can tell you it's been awful. You could have got plenty of souvenirs, but the sight of men blown to pieces, fed me up, and I do not wish for any souvenirs of that massacre. A better name would be scientific murder. You were walking over dead men all the time, and the smell was suffocating.[116]

Private Pirrie of the Machine Gun Company gave another account:

> After the charge the battlefield was a terrible sight. There were thousands of dead. When going into the German trenches we could not help walking over them. Last week the Scotch Guards and a few other regiments made a charge in the same place, but did not come off successful, and believe me we fetched in some of the wounded who had been lying out all week.[117]

111 *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.11.
112 James Cook correspondence 24th May 1915.
113 *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.6; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5.
114 *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7; *Formby Times* 5th June 1915 p.5.
115 James Cook correspondence 21st May and 24th May 1915.
116 *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Southport Visiter* 5th June 1915 p.7.
117 *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.8; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5.

With officers being targeted and suffering disproportionate casualties, Mariott wrote that he was "the only double company commander to [come back untouched]."[118] Nonetheless, his company suffered the second highest casualties behind A company. After the battle he buried his friend (and brother-in-law) Kingston Adams. According to Tyrer, "Lieut. Adams was simply worshipped by the men, of whom he was very proud",[119] a view Pirrie confirmed. "'Come on the 7th" shouted … Lt.Adams … nothing could have inspired us more than seeing him fall, for we all loved him, and we went into them with cold steel."[120] Other officers also came in for similar praise, and their position in leading the men on was clearly significant. Their loss was keenly felt, noted by Sergeant James Taylor – "Amongst the officers killed were Captain Harvey, Lieut. McClelland, both my old officers. Our officers died like what they were in life – gentlemen."[121]

All accounts tell of the large number of casualties. Divisional casualties for the 16–25 May 1915 were other ranks: 536 killed, 3,725 wounded, and 1,006 missing; officers: 46 killed, 120 wounded, and 12 missing.[122] These figures came from the *Official History*, written in 1927, by which time figures should have been reasonably accurate. These were not the first casualties for 7th King's and they had certainly seen death by May, but it was the first time that they had been involved in action which saw casualties on such a large scale. This was also the case for the communities at home, although other Liverpool Regiments had seen action, and it was partly through this realisation that a sense of community evolved. When links were forged after the war, the emphasis was on those places where the dead had fallen. Partaking in the British League of Help's adoption scheme, Southport adopted Festubert while Liverpool adopted Givenchy.[123]

For the men the casualties were obvious very quickly. Ross recounted the feeling after the relief, "A good meal – the first we had had for a week … Then we looked around. Oh! the faces that were missing. My three intimate friends were all missing."[124] Stephens was another to show quite graphically the impact on the ranks: "… out of our platoon, which numbered 49, we have only eight left, having 20 killed and 21 wounded … Over a dozen Maxim guns played on us, and our poor fellows kept

118 Marriott correspondence 23rd May 1915.
119 *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.12; *Southport Visiter* 29th May 1915 p.8; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Formby Times* 29th May 1915 p.5.
120 *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.8; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5.
121 *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.8.
122 *Official History* 1915 Vol. II p.74.
123 A.S. Gregson 'The 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment and the Great War – the experience of a Territorial Battalion and its Home Towns'. Unpublished PhD thesis, Coventry University, 2004; B.F. Lewis "Adoptive Kinship and the British League of Help: Commemoration of the Great War through the Adoption of French Communities" Unpublished PhD thesis, Reading University, 2006.
124 *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7.

dropping like rats."[125] William Campbell's unnamed brother-in-law also referred to the high casualty figures with some degree of passion. When it came to his brother-in-law however, his tone immediately changed. The first part of his letter contrasted with the more idyllic, sacrificial death described in the second:

> Men were dropping but still we kept on, and captured the first trench and the second, but at great cost. When daylight broke on Monday, May 17th, we had a roll call, and the cost was appalling. I soon found Will was missing, and asked permission to search for him. I went on my own, and discovered he had been shot through the brain. He looked very peaceful. He was hit while leading his men on.[126]

This was not untypical. Particular deaths were heroic; the general were appalling. Private Harold Butterworth described the death of Harry Cave in similar vein:

> Harry, acting as one of the bomb throwers along with our Major, went in advance of the men, and both acted with great courage and bravery before they fell mortally wounded. It was a glorious death looked at in a military light, for it was their courageous conduct that enabled our men to capture the trenches without many casualties ….Southport has been hit heavily in this engagement, and the town should know how gallantly her sons have fought under murderous conditions and, what is more, came through victoriously. Before the Germans are pushed back thousands of lives must inevitably be sacrificed, but then, if we are successful the price will ungrudgingly be paid.[127]

It is difficult to arrive at an accurate figure for the battalion casualty list. The Battalion War Diary noted nine officers killed or missing, and four wounded, on 16 May; along with 220 Other Ranks (OR) killed, wounded or missing.[128] Marriott noted in a letter to his father that nine officers had been killed and three wounded, while of the other ranks there were c.300-400 casualties. His own company had been reduced from 252 to about 100 men and one officer.[129] The brigade diary recorded casualty figures but unfortunately the report of operations and the table were lost, and when a typed form of the precis was done in 1924 and added to the diary, the table was not reproduced. Thus, all we have is a note that there were c.2,500 casualties in all, nearly half the fighting strength of 6th Brigade. The diary does note that the battalion strength afterwards was fifteen officers and 639 OR. This compared with

125 *Southport Visiter* 3rd June 1915 p.8; Stephens' figures were confirmed by another Private from 12 Platoon. *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.6; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5.
126 *Bootle Times* 28th May 1915 p.7.
127 *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7.
128 WO95/1360, 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary, 16th May 1915.
129 Marriott correspondence 21st May 1915.

twenty-eight officers in 1st South Staffordshire Regiment, and 601 OR in 1st King's, 801 OR in 1st Royal Berkshire Regiment.[130]

Most of the men are now buried in one of the many small cemeteries in the area, such as the Guards Cemetery at Windy Corner, Post Office Rifles Cemetery, Brown's Road in Festubert, which now includes those originally buried at Cheyne Walk, Givenchy and Le Plantin (South) or Le Plantin (Welsh), and Cuinchy Communal Cemetery, which includes those from the now defunct cemeteries of the Royal Berkshires and the King's Clere, both originally in Cuinchy too.[131] In Marriott's letters he wrote of burying Arthur Hughes where he had fallen, but of taking back Kingston Adams, his wife's brother, to the British lines and burying him after the rest of the battalion had been relieved. Later in his correspondence he reported on his return to the area in 1918 and locating the graves of Kingston Adams, Hughes, McClelland, Hannon and Captains Tweedale and Chisolm amongst the battle debris:

> I found Kingston's grave, by a destroyed German pill box. Lieutenant Gamble is there too and 4 of the King's lead company. The Germans had a little graveyard in the same field. I retraced all the events of 16-19 May. I found several other graves including Major Hughes and Captains Tweedale, McLelland, Hannon. I went 'over the top' where I led the Company over. Then turned south and walked for hours through an unimaginable country of trenches shell holes and all the debris of battle: skulls, skeletons, equipment right on to Givenchy. Here I inspected the mine craters, dozens of them some nearly 100 yards across, and then on to the La Bassee Canal and on to … Brick Stacks at Cuinchy. Could not locate the old Headquarters and with difficulty located old front line between the brickstacks … [The lines] of 1915 are still there. The line had remained stationary there since the beginning until the last retreat, and the back areas are simply dotted with huge cemeteries. I could not find the grave of Captain Chisholm in Festubert. I did find many of the earlier graves of 1914 and 1915. I made my way back through le Plantin and Gorre to Bethune, walking all the way. There is not a single house standing either in Gorre or Essars, places we knew so well in 1915.[132]

Wyrall, who tabulated casualties by year, listed 109 deaths in the battalion.[133] Written in 1935, this was not too far away from the 'official' figure of 115 found in *Soldiers Died*, although his total number of deaths for the war was 100 less than that in *Soldiers Died*. 115 represented nearly 12% of the total deaths, of which there were

130 WO95/1352, 6th Brigade War Diary, 25th May, 1915.
131 *Indices of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.*
132 Marriott letter to wife, Cicely 10th and 11th December 1918.
133 E. Wyrall, *The History of the King's Regiment (Liverpool) 1914-19* (London, Edward Arnold, 1935) pp.230-231.

960, for the battalion during the entire war. Of those 115, 98 had enlisted at Bootle, Seaforth, Southport, Crosby or Birkdale. That figure of 98 does not include those who were born or lived in the catchment area, but enlisted elsewhere, including Liverpool itself.[134] By any calculation, therefore, this was a severe blow to the region. It must also be remembered that 6th Brigade contained the 1st and 5th King's Liverpool Battalions, and their casualties also impacted on the area and on the regiment as a whole. The impact of officer casualties was severe: all of the nine had pre-war Territorial commissions and the officer contingent was practically halved.

Reports of the battle stressed the honour of the regiment, and this would have been helpful in securing more recruits for the front. While Purser had much praise for other units, including the 5th King's, the Irish and the stretcher bearers, as well as the officers and men who risked themselves to save their friends, his point was to refer to the local appeal. "No wonder the Liverpool regiments have a good name out here. They deserve it and the General sent good praise for our battalion."[135]

Relations between ranks was a key issue. The attitude toward officers who had been killed (see examples relating to Harvey and McClelland above) tends to confirm Sheffield's and Morris' findings, that the amount of deference and respect accorded the officer was related to their battlefield performance.[136] It was also undoubtedly to do with the role played by company officers, in particular in routine matters. This factor was recognised in Orders in November 1915 of 22nd Brigade, 7th Division:

> It is most noticeable that both the spirit of the men and the amount of work done is far better in those battalions where the Officers are constantly amongst their men, inspiring them to work and even taking a hand themselves. Everyone can learn from the experiences and difficulties of others.[137]

Another element of the success in the field was to enhance the reputation of the battalion and the regiment. There was a real regimental pride in being part of the Liverpool Regiment, as well as the more localised identification with the Southport Terriers. Contrary to the findings of some other writers, the extent of dilution in local men in this battalion was not extensive and the sense of identity and community was maintained throughout the war, aided not least by the 'Lancastrianisation' of the 55th Division after 1916.[138]

134 *Soldiers Died,* pp.48-58.
135 *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9.
136 G. Sheffield, *Leadership in the trenches: Officer-man relations, morale and discipline in the British Army in the era of the First World War* (London, Macmillan, 2000) pp. 146-148; Morris "The Leeds Rifles" p.919.
137 WO95/1660, 22nd Brigade War Diary, 4th December 1915.
138 J.G. Fuller, *Popular culture and troop morale in the British and Dominion Forces 1914-1918* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990) p.57; Beckett has also referred to the high extent of dilution in these units: I.F.W. Beckett, 'The Territorial Force' in I.F.W. Beckett and

It was also important for the men to know that others had respect for them. Private Percy Oliver said: "The 7th King's can always say they have fought and beat some of the cream of the Kaiser's Prussian Guards. We have won a grand name from our Brigade staff".[139] Ormerod wrote: "We have covered ourselves with glory, and have gained great respect from the Regulars. The Irish Guards, I am told, say we take 'The cake and biscuit too'"[140]

At the outset of the war the Territorials had had a mixed reputation, and their levels of discipline in particular had been a key feature of Kitchener's decision not to send them out in autumn 1914. Nonetheless, a number of units had already left for the front by Christmas and, as Peter Simkins has pointed out, there were mixed views about their deployment.[141] Despite the high number of volunteers for overseas service and the fact that home defence was now in the hands of third lines and troops in training, Ian Beckett noted that Kitchener did not alter his opinion of the force.[142] This was a line well known by the Terriers themselves, and this was one reason why it was so important to prove their ability and enhance their own reputation, as well as that of Territorials in other divisions. This determination to prove the quality of the units caused some officers to lead their men shouting, as reported by Private Pirrie, "We are only Territorials but we'll show them what we are made of".[143]

Some signs of the strains between home and war fronts surfaced in the post-battle correspondence, although such views were in the minority. An unnamed writer, printed in the *Bootle Times* complained that: "When one is hard at it out here doing one's level best and then picks up a paper and reads of some of the blighters striking for more pay it makes one disgusted."[144] However, the concerns were generally more directed at persuading people to enlist, such as Private Webster's entreaty from his hospital bed:

> I have not yet realised being in England, it seems too good to be true, and yet there is so much to be done and so many brave lives to be sacrificed before the Hun murderers are crushed once and forever. I wonder how long will it take for those who know that they are needed to add their names to Southports's Roll of

K. Simpon (eds.) *A Nation in Arms: A Social Study of the British Army in the First World War* ed. (London, Tom Donovan Publishing, 1990) p.147. For the impact of Major General Jeudwine on the 55th West Lancashire Division from 1916 see Gregson, 'The 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment and the Great War' and H.B. McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2005).

139 *Bootle Times* 28th May 1915 p.7.

140 *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Southport Visiter* 5th June 1915 p.12.

141 P. Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies 1914-16* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988), p.44.

142 Beckett, "The Territorial Force", p. 131.

143 *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.8; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5.

144 *Bootle Times* 28th May 1915 p.7.

> Honour. They have been set a fine example by our late young Captain, who will be sadly missed by the men of 14 Platoon. He was an officer and a gentleman.[145]

Despite this prevailing view regarding their success and the need for recruits to get the job done, the experience had demonstrated to the men that, given a choice, they would rather be at home. This attitude could perhaps be summed up by James Cook's report of a review by Lord Derby on 7 June, who told the men that in a few hours he would be in Liverpool: "we were all saying 'lucky chap' under our breath and derived no pleasure from his speech."[146] Cook's subsequent career shows that he was no recalcitrant soldier but simply had a very understandable perspective towards the Earl's rather insensitive words.

The first report of the battle appeared in the *Southport Visiter* on 18 May 1915, though there were few details.[147] The first in-depth reports did not feature until 22 May (*Southport Guardian*, *Crosby Herald*, *Southport Visiter*), while the first mention in the *Bootle Times* was 28 May, and in the *Formby Times* the 29 May. This is largely explained by the different publishing dates. The attack started on Sunday 16 May, the troops were relieved from the trenches on Thursday night (20 May), and the first detailed reports appeared in time for the papers on 22 May, but just too late for the *Bootle Times* which had to wait a further week.

Some historians have claimed that the public knew little of casualties, of the attrition, of the real nature of the war, until much later, and certainly not in 1915.[148] However, the evidence of the Southport papers suggests that the information was abroad, and little academic attention has been paid to the impact of letters and reports in local papers. The local press had a different perspective on the war to the national press. Certainly, the papers would be unlikely to be as easily available to the enemy, although sending local papers to the men at the front was a common occurrence. There was clearly no censorship imposed by the local papers of the horrors of war. Nor was there any attempt to hide the fate of individuals, or spare their families grief. However, this attitude could be seen as reflecting the community spirit, asking the whole town to share in the success and the loss together. In an attempt to make the losses bearable, this notion of shared community experience was vital in keeping morale at home at a high level and was assisted by having a particular local battalion

145 *Southport Guardian* 22nd May 1915 p.7.
146 James Cook correspondence 8th June 1915; WO95/1360, 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary, 7th June 1915.
147 *Southport Visiter* 18th May 1915 p.6.
148 For example, see P. Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist and Myth Maker from the Crimea to Vietnam* (London, Andre Deutsch, 1975), p.108; M.J. Farrar, *News from the Front: War correspondents on the Western Front 1914-18* (Stroud, Sutton, 1998) p.ix.

with which to identify. Through such accounts in newspapers, the level of understanding and sense of belonging between the war and home fronts was built up at an early stage.

The sparsity of official news of local soldiers was therefore of some concern to the press and anything which broke through that 'fog' of GHQ war information was a bonus. The press had a dilemma however. They were keen to present a story, but obviously were also aware of the need to maintain interest and increase recruitment levels. Unpalatable descriptions may have hindered that balance but equally honesty may have increased respect. Knightley has suggested that when, in the later 1920s, the truth about the war became known, this was a turning point for the press as a whole in this country and confidence in the newspaper to tell the truth to the public was lost.[149] However, the publication of harsh accounts by local men demonstrates that, at least in 1915, the home public heard much of the reality of war.

The *Bootle Times* based its report of the action on a few letters, but the *Formby Times*, the *Southport Visiter* and the *Southport Guardian*, produced extensive reports and details under bold titles such as "Praise for Local Lads", "Seventh's Glorious Charge", and "Southport's Heroic Soldier Sons".[150] These titles and interpretation of events sounded like propaganda, in contrast to the content of actual accounts and letters. There was no attempt to detract from the casualty list as alongside these reports were lists of men killed, and personal details of many of the men who had been lost. In fact, the *Southport Visiter*, which was able to steal a march on the others as a result of its publishing dates, led with: "Southport's Battalion's Heavy Losses".[151]

The editorial of the *Bootle Times* was quite clear in emphasizing the local identification with the battle: "The famous charges will long form the subject of admiring talk in this neighbourhood, which is so closely associated with this regiment and goes to prove that the young manhood of Bootle is doing its share towards crushing that monster of organised brutality which is named militarism."[152]

The local orientation of reports backfired a little when the papers reached the front. The emphasis on the Southport men in the 7th King's caused a few ripples of discontent when copies of the *Southport Visiter* reached the troops, prompting a 'Sandgrounder' to write: "there are one or two Liverpool or district boys in this battalion … and I think they would have appreciated a word or two on their behalf … now just give a word of praise to the Liverpool boys." The Editor inserted a by-line reading, "Of course the whole of the 7th King's Liverpool Battalion has done splendidly, and the designation 'Southport Battalion' includes the Formby, Bootle and other men from this district."[153]

149 Knightley, *The First Casualty*, p.81.
150 *Formby Times* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Southport Visiter* 29th May 1915 p.7; *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 pp.9 and 11.
151 *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.6.
152 *Bootle Times* 28th May 1915 p.7.
153 A 'Sandgrounder' was one born in Southport; *Southport Visiter* 8th June 1915 p.6.

It is interesting to note, however, that the praise heaped on the Territorials was not restricted to the very local press. The *Liverpool Echo* also carried the story. A number of battalions of the regiment were in the fight and so there is a slightly wider regimental outlook to its account, but even so the headlines tell the story: "King's in thick of the Fight. Fine work in the battle of Festubert a tribute to gallant local officers. Splendid record of bravery. How our Territorials and Regulars stood the great test of courage."[154] The emphasis on the brave work of Territorials and Regulars together was a clear message of the solidarity and uniformity in the regiment as a whole.[155]

The *Southport Guardian* reported on the increase in recruiting on 29 May.

> Obviously the young men of Southport who up to the present had not decided to join the colours, have by this now famous charge at last been moved … the last seven days have constituted a record recruiting week for this popular regiment. Over 150 men have been passed by the doctor. The record exceeds anything that has been done by any other Territorial Battalion in the West Lancashire Division, over 1,800 recruits having been obtained for the 7th King's and quite half of these have come from the Southport and Birkdale district. The Second Battalion is considerably over strength, the Third Battalion is nearly complete, and there are rumours of a Fourth Battalion to be formed.[156]

The paper was quoting the recruiting officer, Captain Campbell, and although there is no other corroboration available for the figures, a Third Battalion was fully formed and was engaged on home defence for the duration, suggesting that the action was instrumental in providing a boost to recruiting in the area. It did, however, coincide with Derby's call as Chairman of the West Lancashire Territorial Force Association, for local councils to increase the recruiting campaign in early May.[157]

Some letters from the front made the point about the need for recruits, including Corporal Wainwright in his letter to the Mayor: "I cannot say what our casualties are not having seen the list, but I am afraid it will go hard against the town, but trust others will soon come forward to take our places."[158] The 1 June 1915 edition of the *Southport Visiter* printed a list of recent recruits alongside more letters from the Front, and the

154 *Liverpool Echo* 29th May 1915 p.3.

155 "No words can fittingly describe the pluck and gallantry shown by our troops, Regulars and Territorials alike, during the recent fighting in the Festubert district." – *Liverpool Echo* 29th May 1915 p.3; a report on "The Fighting Fifth – Liverpool Terriers in the thick of it" was followed by another on "Seventh Liverpool's Fine Work – Storming German trenches." – *Liverpool Echo* 26th May 1915 p.3: Another report included some letters, such as that from Private James Blackwood, B Company, which had not appeared in the Southport or Bootle papers.- *Liverpool Echo* 28th May 1915 p.5.

156 *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.7.

157 Bootle County Borough Minutes Volume XXXII 5th May 1915; LUD7 Litherland Urban District Council Minutes 3rd May 1915.

158 *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9; *Southport Visiter* 29th May 1915 p.4.

report of a memorial service to Private W.A.Scott, who had been killed in the action, thus stressing the importance of continuity and encouraging recruitment with tales from the front while recognising the sacrifices that were being made.[159]

The contact with home through letters and newspaper articles could be laced with trench humour, such as the example which showed a clear grasp of the political arguments raging at home and their links with what the author was going through in France. Transcribed phonetically in Lancashire dialect, it confirms Joyce's emphasis on the importance of dialect, particularly in Lancashire, and its relevance to social identity.[160] Shortly after the battle, Private Joseph Peet of 5 Platoon, B Company, wrote back:

> I am now enjoying a little Continental trip 'somewhere in France' … and I can't say it is any too healthy round these parts just at present. I have had a good long spell in the trenches, but I got a bit of a change a week last Saturday. We were ordered to charge the Germans … Over we went with cries of "Remember the Lusi". I saw a few Germans running away, and I shouted, "Howd on a bit" but I think they were in too big of a hurry, or else they wanted to catch a train to 'Bonks'.[161] They're quare chaps thoose Jarmons … German artillery started to shell us …' Tawk about fireworks, Belle Vue's nod in id, and they're nod sich noice tackle to run up again, I con tell tha, and it pays to keep thou heead down. Some folk think as owd England is going down a bit through drinking ale, but they are not as bad as folks in this country. Every other house sells ale here and the ale is so bad it makes me 'screet' every time I look at it. All the youngsters drink ale and smoke pipes as big as themselves … We got a good bath and a clean shirt. I wanted one badly, for my shirt had started to walk and talk for itself. I would like to walk in your house just at present and have a pint. I would give half-a-crown for a pint of "Whittle Springs" for the ale in this country is only fit for drowning fleas … I hope I have the luck to get back to Southport again. At any rate before t'Jarmons get to Bonks.[162]

The importance of this collection of correspondence from men in 1/7th King's Liverpool Regiment is in their ability to give the front line perspective within the context provided by military analyses, both contemporary and more recent. They show a realism, a forging of communal identity and a resolve amongst a collection of civilians with very different life experiences to the regular soldier. They talk of fear and bravery and spare the home readership little in their descriptions of warfare. Together they provide a crucial element contributing towards a fuller understanding of the battle of Festubert and the wider Territorial experience in 1915.

159 *Southport Visiter* 1st June 1915 p.3.
160 P. Joyce, *Visions of the People* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.279.
161 Banks: a village north of Southport.
162 *Southport Visiter* 29th May 1915 p.4.

12

"A Coda to the Second Battle of Ypres": International Trench 6–10 July 1915[1]

Michael LoCicero

> *But the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity.*[2]

In 2002 the BBC broadcast a one-off television documentary entitled *The Forgotten Battlefield* which chronicled the on-going efforts of the "Diggers", a remarkable group of amateur Belgian archaeologists, to excavate a hitherto uncleared portion of the former Ypres battleground.[3] Situated east of the Yser Canal near the village of Boesinghe, the site, soon to be the home of a modern industrial estate, revealed an astonishing profusion of unearthed wartime munitions, artefacts and dozens of human remains, some of which were subsequently identified as British and German combatants who perished during a local operation launched by General Sir Herbert Plumer's Second Army in July 1915.[4] The almost unknown brigade-level attack, carried out under the aegis of a manpower-depleted infantry division, was conceived to improve an unsatisfactory tactical situation in the immediate aftermath of the murderous Second Battle of Ypres

1 Major-General J.C. Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes, Vol. 1* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1949), p. 107.

2 Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial,* Chapter V (1658).

3 This government sanctioned remit to excavate the canal bank battlefield area occurred in the decade before "conflict archaeology" gained credence in discipline related academic circles.

4 See Boesinghe: The Forgotten Battlefield <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47ClVMxyQQs> Activities of the Diggers – SUMMER AND AUTUMN 1999 <http://www.mausershooters.org/diggers/E/activiteiten/1999-rijkeoogst/welkom.htm> Activities of the Diggers – KNOWN UNTO GOD <http://www.mausershooters.org/diggers/E/activiteiten/stoffelijkeresten/welkom.htm> and Activities of the Diggers: 6–9 July 1915: "A small but successful operation", but at what price? <http://www.mausershooters.org/diggers/E/activiteiten/06071915/welkom.htm>

(22 April – 25 May 1915).[5] Limited in scope and relatively successful in outcome, this small-scale enterprise was indicative of what could be achieved by meticulous planning and, as generally articulated in pre-war *Field Service Regulations*, close cooperation between various arms of the service (artillery, engineers, infantry, etc.) during the still nascent period of position warfare.[6] Nevertheless, failure at both army and corps level to recognise the need for a much larger undertaking and the concurrent decision to carry on regardless of a shortage of available men and material, underlined the ultimately barren consequences of narrow front assaults. Unfortunately, such attacks would prove a costly and morale-sapping predilection of British commanders well into 1916 and, on many occasions, 1917.[7]

Genesis

Thirty-three days had passed since Duke Albrecht of Württemberg's German *Fourth Army* discharged "greenish-yellow" chlorine gas clouds that, having mutated into a "bluish-white" mist with the aid of a gentle wind, forced asphyxiated elements of two French divisions to abandon positions near Langemarck on 22 April 1915.[8] The grave threat of an enemy breakthrough by way of the resultant 3,000 yard breach and consequent series of fierce defensive battles was followed by a second Allied general retirement of 0.62 miles (1 kilometre) to the environs of Ypres on the night of 24–25 May. Frustrated by a desperate but ultimately successful resistance against great odds, the attackers were left in possession of commanding ridgelines to the east. Thus the notorious and now much reduced Ypres Salient, succinctly described by veteran and author R.H. Mottram as "a roughly semi-circular line of defence around that medieval city, which, beginning at Boesinghe, on the Furnes [Yser] Canal, due north of the town, and passing eastward through Hooge, at a pretty even radius of a little more than three miles, ceased to be called the 'Salient', somewhere near St Eloi", was destined to remain practically unaltered until the Battle of Messines in June 1917.[9]

5 See Sir J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1915 Vol. 1* (London: Macmillan, 1927), John Lee, *The Gas Attacks: Ypres 1915* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2009), George Cassar, *Hell in Flanders Fields: Canadians at the Second Battle of Ypres* (Toronto: Dundurn Group LTD, 2010) and, by the same author, *Trial By Gas: The British Army at the Second Battle of Ypres* (Sterling, Virginia: Potomac Books Inc., 2014) for narratives of the Second Battle of Ypres.

6 See *Field Service Regulations Part I: Operations 1909 (Reprinted with Amendments, 1912*) (London: HMSO, 1914).

7 For example, see Michael LoCicero, *A Moonlight Massacre: The Night Operation on the Passchendaele Ridge, 2 December 1917: The Forgotten Last Act of the Third Battle of Ypres* (Solihull: Helion & Company, 2014).

8 Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1915 Vol. I*, p. 177.

9 R.H. Mottram, *Through the Menin Gate* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), p. 40. Ralph Hale Mottram (1883-1971) was the author of the once celebrated, but now largely forgotten *Spanish Farm Trilogy 1914-1918*.

It was within the northern sector of this constricted frontage that prevailing tactical circumstances in one the worst sectors appeared to demand immediate offensive action against enemy-occupied Pilckem Ridge. Dominating the Yser Canal extending north and south of the Ypres – Staden railway, its steadily rising western escarpment provided German artillery observers with excellent vistas to engage a variety of targets well into the enemy's western and southern hinterlands. Protected by extensive belts of *cheveaux de frise* amongst the midsummer undergrowth, successive revetted trench lines and fortified farmsteads, the ridge had been transformed into a veritable fortress by June 1915.[10]

Aptly described as "the worst trenches of the Allied line", the Yser Canal sector – encompassing the west bank villages of Boesinghe, Lizerne and Steenstraat – had stabilised in close proximity to the canal by 15 May when concerted attempts by the *XXIII Reserve Corps* to push beyond or maintain territorial gains west of the man-made conduit north of Ypres were repulsed with staggering losses in the face of a stalwart defence by French and Belgian troops.[11] By early summer the attackers, having failed to establish a bridgehead, had dug into the eastern canal bank running opposite Steenstraat to Boesinghe. Approximately 250 yards south of the latter village's railway bridge, the German frontline, extending SSE beyond the canal in a sweeping arc as far as the salient's apex at Sanctuary Wood and Hooge, marked the territorial limit of ensuing offensive efforts by *XXVI Reserve Corps* and *XXVII Reserve Corps* throughout late April and May.[12] Of the two British Corps (VI and V) comprising Second Army by early June, "one ruled from Boesinghe to the Menin Road that runs roughly east from Ypres to Hooge, and divided the salient in two, the other from thence to St Eloi."[13]

The battle-worn and understrength 4th (Regular) Division, one of the original formations of the 1914 British Expeditionary Force [BEF], relieved the French in the Yser Canal sector on the night of 7/8 June 1915. The left-hand formation of the newly

10 Jon Cooksey, *Flanders 1915: Rare Photographs from Wartime Archives* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2005), p. 78 and Stephen McGreal, *Boesinghe* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2010), p. 46. Then 2nd Lieutenant F.C. Hitchcock observed that parties dispatched by both sides to clear away undergrowth after dark were a common occurrence at this time: "One could see the Germans, who were out on grass-cutting expeditions in No-Man's-Land, quite easily when the star-shells went up; and as the Fusiliers also had grass-cutting parties out, they let the enemy carry on in peace. Some of the Boches were singing, we supposed to create a peaceful atmosphere until they finished their job." See Captain F.C. Hitchcock, *Stand To! A Diary of the Trenches 1915–1918* (Norwich: Gliddon Books, 1988 reprint of 1937 edition), p. 41.

11 Cooksey, *Flanders 1915*, p.79, Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1915 Vol.1*, pp. 339-40 and Lee, *The Gas Attacks*, pp. 120-21.

12 McGreal, *Boesinghe*, p. 46.

13 Mottram, *Through the Menin Gate*, p. 52.

formed VI Corps,[14] its severe manpower losses at Second Ypres (10,859 officers and men killed, wounded and missing) were sustained during the frantic defence of fixed positions and reckless headlong counter-attacks that characterized Allied operations during this chaotic battle.[15] Occupying a defensive system ranging south to north from Turco Farm to a junction with French *XXXVI Corps* south of Boesinghe railway bridge, arriving British units encountered a prevailing "live and let live" understanding between enemies in a part of the salient where trenches were particularly notorious for their low water table.[16] "Most of the land was in meadow, now bleached by the gas."[17] The canal obstacle, situated in the immediate rear of VI Corps' forward zone, was traversed south to north by eleven makeshift bridges from "Halifax Road"[18] communication trench to Boesinghe bridge:

> The canal was about 50 yards in breadth and about 15 feet deep in the centre. It ran due north from Dixmude from Ypres, and was connected with the Ypres – Comines Canal at Kaai due north of the city. It had high banks on both sides, which were thickly belted by bushy-topped poplar trees. It ran parallel with the main road to Boesinghe, which was on its western side. The country was typically Flemish, barren wastes, fields of rotten corn, grass or stubble, with dykes or ditches separating them. The ruins of old burnt-out homesteads were studded about here and there.[19]

Frequently shelled by hostile artillery, continuous repair and maintenance of bridge crossing points as the only avenues of approach to the east bank defences was the exclusive purview of attached Royal Engineer [RE] field companies.[20]

British regimental histories and personal accounts often relate the poor standards of sanitation and hygiene experienced on taking over their erstwhile ally's positions.[21]

14 VI Corps was organised within Second Army on 1 June 1915. Initially comprised of 4th Division from V Corps and 6th Division from III Corps, it took over responsibility of the left of the BEF's line (Ypres – Staden railway to Ypres – Roulers railway) on a five-mile front.

15 TNA: WO95/271: 'Second Army G.X27', 7 June 1915, Second Army War Diary, Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1915 Vol.1*, p. 356, Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes, Vol. 1*, p. 107 and C.T. Atkinson, *The Royal Hampshire Regiment Vol. 2 1914–1918* (Glasgow: Robert Maclehose & Co, 1952), p.65.

16 See Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System* (London: Pan Books, 2000).

17 Hitchcock, *Stand To!*, p. 33.

18 Delineating the southern extremity of 4th Division's new sector, Halifax Road ran from the east bank of the Yser Canal to the vicinity of Lancashire Farm.

19 Hitchcock, *Stand To!*, p. 88.

20 McGreal, *Boesinghe*, pp. 45-46. See Cooksey, *1915*, pp. 88-93 for photographs of these bridges in summer 1915.

21 For example, see Atkinson, *The Royal Hampshire Regiment Vol. 2 1914-1918*, p. 64 and Guy Chapman, *A Passionate Prodigality* (London: Ivor, Nicholson & Watson, 1933), pp. 34-35.

2nd Lancashire Fusiliers in canal bank trenches June 1915. (Aurel Sercu)

Ramshackle, filthy and fly-infested with unburied corpses from both sides lying about everywhere, the squalid state and omnipresent odour of the east bank canal defences were no exception. 1st Somerset Light Infantry's diarist remarked "the trenches are appalling – no wire, parapets, about one sandbag thick and with two German saps up to within 20 yds and 10 yds of our trenches … Bodies are buried in the parapet and the stench is very bad."[22] Fears that the enemy had undermined the sector were dismissed as "improbable" by a consulted RE officer until the detonation of a small mine in the early hours of 9 June. Five men of 1st Royal Warwickshire Regiment were killed by the blast.[23]

The first order of business for 4th Division's component RE companies and detached fatigue parties of incoming battalions was the complete overhaul of inherited fire and communication trenches. Sanitation was rapidly improved by burial of the reachable dead, placement of new latrines and generous applications of creosote or lime chloride when and where required. Some positions, hastily dug during the heat of battle, were abandoned as untenable. Average distances between opposing trenches was some

22 TNA: WO95/1484: 1st Somerset Light Infantry War Diary, 11 June 1915.
23 See Julian Sykes, 'The Shooting of Private Pearce', *Gun Fire No. 4* (n.d.), pp. 227-28.

75 yards, so standard belts of barbed wire secured by hundreds of wooden stakes proved almost impossible to erect without heavy losses amongst nocturnal wiring parties. Pre-fabricated *cheveaux de fries* or knife rests, "consisting of two X shaped supports spaced by a stout length of timber, acting as a framework for barbed wire", were adopted by both sides as economical and effective stop-gap barricades to bolster pre-existing defensive arrangements.[24] The construction of breastwork revetments, the only viable method of entrenching in the low-lying terrain, was supplemented with so-called "grouse butt" outposts where the siting of a continuous trench line was impossible. Additional work also proceeded on dugouts and shelters, the canal embankments becoming honeycombed with numerous tunnelled accommodations.[25] 1st Hampshire's tours (11–16 and 21–25 June) in this now bustling sector were most memorable for the effective bombardments by an otherwise perceived "unenterprising" enemy's trench mortars: "Both were fairly quiet, patrols did some effective work, locating the enemy and finding targets for our guns when they had any shells to fire, and during the second tour a new forward trench was dug close to the enemy." Casualties were, in comparison to those sustained at Second Ypres, "light, 4 men killed and 38 wounded …" Sergeant A.J. Cook of 1st Somerset Light Infantry recalled an altogether more active opponent during his battalion's tours of the same sector: "Shells shriek and howl through the air all day and night, snipers are always alert for a target and rarely fail to find a victim. Trench mortar bombs, which we call 'flying pigs', hurtle through the air to burst with terrific force, blowing up parapets, traverses and dugouts. Men are just battered about, mere cannon-fodder for the open-mouthed guns."[26] The stress and strain proved too much for one Somerset Light Infantry subaltern who, in an obvious "mental" state, drew his revolver and shot a recalcitrant private in the right hand "for refusing to stop talking."[27]

Subsequent summer fighting within the salient was ultimately determined by the adverse local military situation resulting from Second Ypres. A dearth of available manpower and artillery projectiles, the latter a catalyst for a political firestorm at home, limited what British commanders could do to rectify or improve unfavourable tactical conditions opposite an alert, aggressive and well-equipped foe firmly

24 McGreal, *Boesinghe*, p. 46.

25 TNA: WO95/271: 'G 807', 3 June 1915, Second Army War Diary, Cooksey, *1915*, p. 82 and McGreal, *Boesinghe*, pp. 44-45.

26 Atkinson, *The Royal Hampshire Regiment Vol. 2 1914-1918*, pp. 65-66 and Lieutenant-General G.N. Molesworth (ed), *A Soldier's War: Being the Diary of the late ARTHUR HENRY COOK. D.C.M., M.M., B.E.M., written during four years' service with the 1st Battalion, The Somerset Light Infantry, on the Western Front, France, during the Great War, 1914-1918* (Taunton: E. Goodman & Son, 1958), p. 41.

27 8026 Private Pearce was shot by an overwrought 2nd Lieutenant Martin following the relief of 1st Royal Warwickshire Regiment on 11 June 1915. The latter was placed under arrest, his statement taken before transfer to No. 11 Field Ambulance for observation. See Sykes, 'The Shooting of Private Pearce', *Gun Fire No. 4*, pp. 227-28 and TNA: WO95/1499: 1st Somerset Light Infantry War Diary.

ensconced on eastern heights.[28] The key to improving positions directly opposite and/or the eventual seizure of Pilckem Ridge in its entirety were the outlying trenches and strongpoints covering its western slope. Extending in depth as far back as Pilckem village surmounting the summit, the German defences were fronted by "International Trench", a crenelated 350-yard former French excavation that passed into enemy hands the previous spring.[29] Behind this short stretch of sandbags, wire mesh and timber reinforcement lay a network of communication trenches grouped around a "nucleus" of machine-gun strongpoints known as "Farm 14" and "Fortin 17", the map name designations being derived "from the hillocks on which they stood."[30] International Trench was the designated "western outpost" of these hilltop bulwarks. Local terrain configurations "made it possible to site the line that the points could be mutually supporting from south to north." Some 600 yards to the rear of these foremost German defences lay, with still incomplete trench works surrounding them, the second line incorporating Zouave House, Hill 10, Gallwitz House and Mackensen Farm. Beyond this again "was a clump of strongpoints: Villa Gretchen, Boche House and Sapeur House" shielding all avenues of approach to Pilckem, the latter a "natural fortification formed by the road triangle." Steadily rising to a barely perceptible height of 78 metres above sea level – 60 feet above the canal – the second line, outlying Pilckem strongpoints and corresponding village fortress were situated on the 15-metre, 20-metre and 24-metre contour lines respectively. Faced with the tactical problem of storming such inordinately strong defences, there appeared to be no alternative to consequent heavy losses "unless it could be made in upon such a scale as to sweep up to Pilckem in one operation; or unless sufficient artillery fire could be maintained to neutralize the supporting points not only until the selected sector of front line had been captured, but also until it had been consolidated and incorporated in the British front line system with proper communication trenches dug to the rear; and unless furthermore such a counter-battery bombardment could be maintained as would protect the attacking and consolidating forces until their task had been completely carried out."[31]

The subsequent decision to conduct a local offensive operation in the east canal bank sector had its roots in a French scheme to capture Fortin 17 by *coup des main*. The

28 See R.J.Q. Adams, *Arms and the Wizard: Lloyd George and the Ministry of Munitions 1915-1916* (London: Cassell, 1978), Adrian Bristow, *A Serious Disappointment: The Battle of Aubers Ridge 1915 and the Shell Scandal* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 1995) and George Cassar, *Asquith as a War Leader* (London: Continuum, 1994).

29 The "International" sobriquet was said to have its origins in how many times the trench changed hands. See Anon., *Ypres and the Battles of Ypres* (Clermond – Ferrand: Michelin & Cie, 1919), p. 18.

30 *Fortin* is the French term for makeshift field fortification. See Cooksey, *Flanders 1915* pp. 122-25 for contemporary photographs of Farm 14 in German hands.

31 Captain Reginald Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918* (London: Rifle Brigade Club, 1927), p. 114.

International Trench and vicinity from the air July 1915. (TNA: WO 95/1489)

brainchild of Zouave Colonel Dechiselle commander of the "Zwanhoff Farm Sector", this enterprise was devised as a necessary preliminary to further operations against Pilckem Ridge. "The whole essence of his plan was a surprise attack to be delivered by night in complete silence, without artillery preparation." Zero hour was scheduled for 2:00 a.m. on the night of 5-6 June, a single horn blast to signal the "Aymet Battalion" of 2nd Zouaves, "wearing white neckerchiefs for mutual identification, and accompanied by two machine-gun sections and by sappers", to rush forward and seize the objective.[32] The battalion commander, on receipt of word that Fortin 17 had been secured, would see to it that four white rockets were discharged as a signal for a protective artillery bombardment to commence north and east of the objective. The pending British relief led to the proposed operation being shelved but, along with the "other trench stores, Colonel Dechiselle's plan was duly handed over."[33] And there it would have remained; consigned to an obscure file at VI Corps headquarters [HQ], but for the perceived necessity to assist Lieutenant-General Sir Edmund Allenby's neighbouring V Corps.

32 *2nd bis Zouaves des Marche* of *45th* (Algerian) *Division*.
33 Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918*, p.114 and McGreal, *Boesinghe*, p. 49.

Situated on the eastern side of Bellewaarde Lake, German-occupied Bellewaarde Ridge overlooked V Corps' northern sector and the "greater part of the area east of Ypres." It was with the object of improving the unfortunate tactical situation north of the Menin Road that Allenby set about planning a minor operation to deprive the enemy of observation from advantageous high ground by securing the ridge. A straightening-out of the much-contested re-entrant extending from Hooge to Railway Wood would occur simultaneously.[34] Desirous that the projected mid-June attack receive as much support as possible, Second Army HQ observed, in documents forwarded to Lieutenant-General J.L. Keir (GOC VI Corps)[35] by its designated MGGS Major-General G.F. Milne[36] on 10 and 19 June, that "it would be advantageous if arrangements could be made to divert attention from the main point of attack" by immediate commencement of an artillery registration programme, the construction of "dummy forming up places to mislead hostile airmen" and, to correspond with like precautions on V Corps' front, the screening-off of portions of the VI Corps sector. The "timely preparation" of assembly trenches was also to be carried out "so to construct them as to render the object they are intended to serve as little obvious as possible."[37] The expectation that VI Corps' efforts would be confined to demonstrations only was called into question in a second correspondence, forwarded by Milne on 10 June, in which Keir was informed that "the Army Commander considers the recapture of the high ground in the vicinity of BELLEWAARDE Lake essential to the carrying out of any other offensive operations east of YPRES, and I am to request that you will consider how you can best assist the action of the V Corps, in order that he may have the benefit of your views not later than 8 p.m. on Saturday 12th instant."[38] Conscious that Plumer might expect more from his command than the previously requested demonstration activity, Keir contemplated where and when to attack in VI Corps sector.

Direct orders for a supporting infantry attack on VI Corps' front did not materialise until after Allenby's push, notwithstanding some moderate initial success, failed to secure Bellewaarde Ridge on 16 June. The assaulting 3rd Division's casualties

34 See Sir J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1915 Vol. 2* (London: Macmillan, 1928), pp. 97-98, Terry Norman (ed), *Armageddon Road: A VC's Diary 1914 to 1916* (London: William Kimber, 1982), pp. 145-52 and Jon Cooksey (ed) *Blood & Iron: Letters from the Western Front* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2011), pp. 58-59.

35 Lieutenant-General John Lindesay Keir (1856-1937). Commissioned Royal Artillery 1876; Staff College 1892; South Africa 1901-02; Major-General 1909; GOC 6th Division July 1914; GOC VI Corps 1915-16. Note: Officers are described by the rank they held during summer 1915.

36 Major-General George Francis Milne (1866-1948). Commissioned Royal Artillery1885; Suakin Expedition 1896; Staff College 1897; Nile Expedition 1898; South Africa 1899-1902; GSO 46th (North Midland) Division TF 1908; GSO 6th Division 1909; Brigadier-General and BGRA 4th Division 1913; MGGS Second Army February – July 1915.

37 TNA: WO95/767: '2nd Army G.53. G.S.59', 10 June 1915, VI Corps War Diary and WO 95/1442: 4th Div. No. GGG/269', 19 June 1915, 4th Division War Diary.

38 TNA: WO95/767: 'G.S. 60. G.57', 10 June 1915, VI Corps War Diary.

amounted to 96 officers and 2,012 men killed, wounded and missing; combined German losses were an estimated 300 men and 157 prisoners. This glaring imbalance of British to enemy manpower losses, official historian Sir James Edmonds later observed, was "almost entirely due, like the casualties at 'Second Ypres', to the enemy's artillery fire with which the British heavies, handicapped by inadequate and limited ammunition, were unable to cope."[39] The outcome of the costly partial-success did not deter Second Army or V Corps from ordering a second attack to secure enemy observation posts on Bellewaarde Ridge.[40] It was with this projected operation in mind that Milne wrote to Keir on 17 June:

> In order to improve the tactical situation on the left of your line, and at the same time to distract the enemy's attention from the vicinity of HOOGE, the Army Commander desires that you will consider the seizing of the small hill (14) and the farm house [Farm 14] in (C.7. a & c) [map reference] on the eastern bank of the canal. It would be advisable that the operation should be carried out in the course of the next week, if the necessary preparations can be made in time, and he would be glad to have your general proposals and estimate of the artillery and ammunition required at the earliest opportunity.[41]

Plumer's objective clearly articulated, Keir, of whom the waspish Major-General Aylmer Haldane (GOC 3rd Division) remarked was "a distinguished artillery officer and took care that neither guns or ammunition were stinted", and his staff immediately consulted the filed away Dechiselle scheme. The latter "was of the opinion that Fortin 17 would have to be captured and consolidated before Farm 14 could be dealt with. Accordingly, on June 19th, VI Corps wrote to 4th Division enclosing Colonel Dechiselle's plan for an attack on the ground now held by the 11th Brigade, and ordering the Division to prepare a plan of attack in that sector, in conformity with the Army Commander's wishes."[42]

Major-General H.F.M. Wilson (GOC 4th Division) was a highly experienced officer with a distinguished record of active service extending back to the Second

39 See Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1915 Vol. 2,* pp.98-102 and Carole McEntee-Taylor, *The Battle of Bellewaarde, June 1915* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2014).

40 The relatively inexperienced 14th (Light) Division, a New Army formation, was chosen by Allenby to carry out this projected second attempt to seize Bellewaarde Ridge. See TNA: WO95/1442: 'Second Army G 453', 19 June 1915, 4th Division War Diary, National Library of Scotland [NLS]: MS 20428: Haldane Diary, 23 June 1915 and NLS: MS 20254: Haldane unpublished memoir, p. 361.

41 TNA: WO95/1442: 'C.388', 17 June 1915, 4th Division War Diary.

42 See NLS: MS 20254: Haldane unpublished memoir, TNA: WO95/1442: 'VI Corps CX 58'and 'Second Army G 453', 19 June 1915, 4th Division War Diary and Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918*, p. 115.

Afghan War.[43] Examination of the new orders caused this seasoned general officer to pause when considering army/corps-level expectations and the available means to carry it out. His veteran 4th Division remained short of senior officers and deficient in overall manpower resources due to debilitating losses sustained during Second Ypres. Reinforcement drafts from Great Britain were barely maintaining infantry strength at acceptable levels. Indeed, serious concerns about the corollary dearth of labour and work required to improve the Yser Canal defences, forced Keir to request an extra pioneer battalion "to assist the 4th Division in their new line."[44] Second Army, on learning that V Corps' renewed operation against Bellewaarde Ridge was scheduled to open on 26 June, "directed the VI Corps to be prepared to make a further attack on July 3rd in the vicinity of Verlorenhoek beyond Potijze, in conjunction with an attack by V Corps in the neighbourhood of Bellewaarde Lake."[45] "Profound uneasiness about the proposed operation" followed, as Wilson pondered what his weakened formation was required to accomplish. The troubled GOC 4th Division wasted little time in expressing his reservations to superiors. "In his opinion the tactical situation on the left could only be satisfactorily improved by undertaking a larger operation 'entailing the capture of the whole German salient' (that is from Fortin 17 to Farm 14) which, with the troops at his disposal, was out of the question." A methodical siege warfare approach (sapping and mining) appeared, in Wilson's estimation, to offer a feasible substitute to direct attack and anticipated casualties of the kind that 4th Division could ill-afford. Nevertheless, the perceived necessity to provide support for V Corps' pending operations – the declared *raison d'être* for proffered diversionary attacks by VI Corps – was accepted by Wilson in principle despite his operational and tactical misgivings.[46]

Wilson's reserved but compliant attitude changed when he learned that the first of the projected operations by V Corps had been postponed.[47] 4th Division's supporting operation, now put back to early July, was, however, still being insisted upon by both army and corps HQs. In response, the exasperated GOC 4th Division composed, "in what amounted to a reasoned protest against the enterprise", a candid three-page document forwarded to VI Corps on 30 June:

43 Major-General Henry Fuller Maitland "Fatty" Wilson (1859-1941). Commissioned Rifle Brigade 1878; Second Afghan War 1878-80; Northwest Frontier 1881; South Africa 1899-1900, 1902; AAG India 1907-11; Brigadier-General and GOC 12 Infantry Brigade 1912-14; Major-General and GOC 4th Division September 1914.

44 See TNA WO 95/767: 'Second Army G.807'. 3 June 1915 and WO 95/271: 'VI Corps GX.27', 7 June 1915, VI Corps War Diary.

45 TNA: WO95/1442: 'Second Army G 453', 19 June 1915, 4th Division War Diary and Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918*, p. 115.

46 Berkley, p. 115.

47 See TNA: WO95/1894: 41 Brigade War Diary, 23, 24 and 29 June 1915 entries.

> Reference to your GX/71, dated 24th June 1915, and other correspondence on the same subject, I understand that the proposed attack by the V Corps is cancelled. Under these circumstances and in view of the expenditure of ammunition for the contemplated operation of the 4th Division, I consider it my duty to point out to you the circumstances under which I conceived this plan.[48]

Major-General H.F.M. Wilson GOC 4th Division. (Author's collection)

A methodical recapitulation of the received series of orders and Wilson's efforts to meet operational requirements followed the contentious opening paragraph. "I was ordered to submit proposals for an attack … to 'improve the tactical situation' on my left flank and 'to distract the enemy's attention from HOOGE'. These operations were to be undertaken in the course of a week, i.e. before 24th June if possible. I was, and am", the document continued, "of [the] opinion that, to make a really satisfactory and speedy improvement in the tactical situation on my left flank, would be a large operation entailing the capture of the whole German salient …" An attendant recap of 4th Division's prevailing manpower deficits and ensuing need for rest and reorganization, was succeeded by the pertinent observation that his command "was not in a condition to make an attack on a large scale. This operation would be, in my opinion, a difficult one, owing to the fact that the space between the hostile trenches about Hill 14 and the canal is very limited and gives insufficient depth for the attacking troops."[49] Wilson next addressed for a second time the mining and sapping scheme as a practicable solution to costly frontal assaults:

> Another method of improving the tactical situation appeared to be to drive the enemy back gradually by a series of small enterprises assisted by mines and forward saps. With this object in view I had already applied to you for the services of miners and you had placed a section of 177th Co[mpany] RE at my disposal …[50]

Then, he continued, "the factor was introduced of having to 'distract the enemy's attention from HOOGE' on a particular date. I did not consider it possible to undertake the larger operation …" The alternative siege operations "were also out of the question as they did not partake sufficiently of the nature of a demonstration. I therefore proposed what appeared to me the best compromise", detailed proposals of which

48 TNA: WO95/1442: '4th Div. No. 000/279/3', 30 June 1915, 4th Division War Diary.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.

were forwarded to VI Corps on 25 June.[51] Wilson concluded with a statement of fortitude underscored by doubt:

> I have every confidence that the operation, if undertaken, will succeed in its object viz. – the capture of the SW portion of the German salient up as far as the road which runs just west of Hill 14 but, and it will probably be at a loss heavier to ourselves than the Germans, if undertaken entirely with the object of improving the tactical situation on my left flank [,] it does not appear to be the best method of attaining the object. As the 5th Corps operation is now postponed, and I understand a new [49th] Division is coming to this Corps, it seems worthy of consideration whether it would not be advisable to postpone this operation also until there are sufficient fresh troops available to undertake the larger operation outlined … The difficulty of want of depth on the western side of Hill 14 will always exist, but I do not consider that it should be impregnable. Given more time, it should be possible to gain ground on this side in some places by sapping forward and joining the heads of the saps to form new trenches.[52]

Having presented his case in the most direct manner military protocol allowed for, Wilson awaited his corps commander's response. "To this letter", the post-war Rifle Brigade history disapprovingly observed, "there seems to have been no reply. July 6 was fixed for the attack."[53]

The "most elaborate detail"

Serious tactical experiments for the offensive were an on-going concern within the BEF throughout 1915. The foundations of the 6 July attack plan can be traced to the Battle of Neuve Chapelle (10-13 March 1915), which established the basic operational/tactical template – artillery bombardment succeeded by infantry assault – of BEF attacks during 1915-17:

> Artillery fire plans rose to major prominence among the infantry's concerns, especially the question of their precise timing and density, for which effective formulae were glimpsed but not grasped. The first creeping barrage and the first machine-gun barrage were fired. Novelties such as aircraft, gas, smoke, trench mortars, Lewis guns and signals – even wireless – began to be absorbed into the general picture …[54]

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918*, p. 116.
54 Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack 1914-1918* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 53.

Planning for the proposed canal bank sector operation was, therefore, also reflective of these progressive tactical developments and the harnessing of available technologies.

Reluctant to "attempt anything substantial" but earnest in his desire to meet the army and corps commanders' wishes, Wilson prepared for an attack on International Trench.[55] Viewed as "relatively unimportant" prior to the First World War, corps command in the British Army primarily operated as an intermediary "post-box for information and orders passing from GHQ to Divisions and vice versa" throughout 1915. "However, as the artillery component of the BEF grew, and its importance was realised, corps began to assume greater importance in the conduct of operations."[56] The latter circumstance was especially true in regard to the forthcoming canal bank assault vis-à-vis the professional relationship between Keir, a gunner by training and inclination, and his subordinate 4th Division commander. The former's expertise and chief responsibility for operational oversight ensured that first and foremost for consideration was assignment of supporting artillery units, the corollary bombardment scheme and ammunition allotments, all of which VI Corps arranged for by 3 July. In addition to 4th Division's component XIV, XXIX and XXXII field artillery brigades, No. 22, No. 26, No. 30 trench howitzer batteries and one "subsection mountain artillery" – the latter unit more often associated with actions on the North-West Frontier instead of the comparatively level Flanders plain – were to be placed at the disposal of the GOC 4th Division.[57] No. 2 Group Heavy Artillery [HAR] – a V Corps asset – was ordered to cooperate, "Details as to zones and periods of fire to be arranged between G.O.C. 4th Division and Brigadier-General [H.C.C. Uniacke] commanding No. 2 Group H.A.R."[58] No. 5 Squadron Royal Flying Corps [RFC] was to arrange aerial observation on behalf of the HAR heavy batteries and "establish an air patrol over the left of VI Corps front from 2:45 a.m. to 9 a.m."[59] The German trenches opposite were to be bombarded for one hour prior to the infantry advance at 6:00 a.m.[60] On the left, the French *XXXVI Corps* would provide fire support by targeting "the enemy's trench parallel to the canal … and the [Ypres – Staden] railway forming a curtain of fire" on the left flank. Counter-battery fire was to be the combined undertaking of No.

55 Atkinson, *The Royal Hampshire Regiment Vol. 2 1914-1918*, p. 66.

56 Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914-18* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006), p. 19.

57 This mountain gun detachment arrived too late on the eve of the attack to participate. See TNA: WO95/1442: 'WAR DIARY', 6-7-15, 4th Division War Diary.

58 Brigadier-General Herbert Crofton Campbell Uniacke (1866-1934). Commissioned Royal Horse Artillery 1885; India 1885-96 and 1899-1902; Commandant RHA School of Gunnery Shoeburyness August-October 1914; CO 5 Brigade RHA 1914-15; GOC No. 2 HAR 1915; GOCRA V Corps 1915-16.

59 TNA: WO95/767: 'VI Corps Operation Order No. 4', 3 July 1915, VI Corps War Diary and WO 95/1496: '4th Division OPERATION ORDER No. 1, 4 July 1915, 1st Rifle Brigade War Diary.

60 Sunrise 6 July was at 3:41 a.m. See WO 157/401: 'CALENDAR July 1915', VI Corps Intelligence File.

2 HAR and *XXXVI Corps* "in the event of German guns opening from the north of the railway."[61] On the right, the neighbouring 6th Division was tasked with carrying out an artillery demonstration against enemy trenches south of the subsidiary rail line "about Y.8 [map reference] and about BELLEWAARDE Farm by cutting wire [,] by shelling the trenches, and by shelling the enemy's artillery positions."[62] Farther south, V Corps made arrangements to cooperate with this diversionary scheme, which was scheduled to begin and end on 6 July at 5:30 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. respectively.[63] 4th Division artillery ammunition allotments, given prevailing shortages, was sufficient for an operation conceived to secure a single trench line: 18-pdr shrapnel (2,800), 18-pdr high explosive [HE] (2,800), 4.5-inch howitzer HE (500), 6-inch howitzer HE (300), 1.57-inch trench mortar (180)[64], 2-inch trench mortar (100)[65] and mountain gun shrapnel (25) HE (25).[66] 2nd HAR's allotment was 9.2-inch howitzer HE (100), 15-inch howitzer HE (25), 60-pdr shrapnel (300), 60-pdr HE (200), 4.7-inch gun shrapnel (400) and HE (400), 6-inch gun shrapnel (40) and HE (40).[67] Phase I of the bombardment (5:00 to 5:40 a.m.) was to consist of wire cutting and trench destruction; this allowed for "3 bursts of fire and two pauses at irregular intervals." In Phase II (5:40 to 5:50 a.m.) there would be a "slacking off of fire" to allow for further observation. The destructive bombardment was scheduled to recommence with Phase III (5:50 to 6:00 a.m.), after which the infantry would assault, and the supporting

61 TNA: WO95/767: 'VI Corps Operation Order No. 4', 3 July 1915, VI Corps War Diary. Aircraft observation and flash-spotting [FS] from established observation posts in church towers, windmills, etc. and kite balloons provided the primary means of enemy battery identification on Second Army front throughout summer 1915. Sound-ranging technology was unavailable at this time, the first FS Section not arriving at the Ypres sector until the following October. See Peter Chasseaud, *Artillery's Astrologers: A History of British Survey and Mapping on the Western Front 1914–1918* (Lewes: Map Books, 1999), pp. 72-77.

62 TNA: WO95/767: 'VI Corps Operation Order No. 4', 3 July 1915, VI Corps War Diary.

63 Ibid.

64 The Vickers 1.57-inch trench mortar was first introduced in March 1915; a total of 127 tubes were in service by late June of that year. Similar to the 2-inch model, the design was complex and expensive to produce. It fired an 18 or 33 lb cast-iron bomb filled with Permite (perchlorate). The former projectile was, however, considered too light whilst the latter had a maximum range of only 200 yards.

65 The 2-inch "Toffee Apple" or "Plum Pudding" trench mortar saw active service in limited numbers from March 1915. Early examples and ammunition were manufactured at the Royal Ordnance Factory; mass production commenced in August 1915.

66 I have been unable to ascertain if the attached mountain gun subsection was armed with the BL 10-pdr or BL 2.5-inch model guns.

67 TNA: WO95/767: 'VI Corps Operation Order No. 4', 3 July 1915, VI Corps War Diary. Ammunition allotments "for the preparation for the attack, the attack, and up to the time when it may be estimated that the objective will have been gained" were carefully calculated beforehand. This did not include ammunition required to repel German counter-attacks at a later period. See TNA: WO95/1442: '4th Div. No. GGG/279', 23 June 1915, 4th Division War Diary.

gunners' range increased to select target areas beyond the objective.[68] "Owing to rows of high trees", it was impossible "to bring 18-pdr fire to bear on the wire at the points to be assaulted." Moreover, the portion of International Trench "running E & W" was "defiladed from view in front by the shape of the ground and a hedge immediately in front of it." This section could only be observed from a post near Boesinghe Station. It followed, therefore, that wire cutting "would have to be effected by trench howitzers [mortars] and howitzers." Nevertheless, field gunners appear to have surmounted these perceived difficulties and effectively participated in the wire cutting bombardment on the day of the attack.[69] Enemy observation posts established in buildings north of the Ypres – Staden railway were to be eliminated by series of bombardments extending over a period of "2 or 3 days" prior to the assault; destruction of the enemy's now ubiquitous *cheveaux de fries* barbed wire obstacles fronting International Trench – strengthened to a considerable degree since the British took over responsibility for the canal bank sector – was to take place on the day of the attack.[70]

Brigadier-General C.B. Prowse GOC 11th Brigade. (*Illustrated London News*, 22 July 1916)

First presented in outline by the brigade major of 11th Infantry Brigade (GOC Brigadier-General C.B. Prowse)[71] on 28 June; the operational intent was to "attack a portion of the German trenches with the object of taking ground to our front in

68 TNA: WO95/1442: 'SECRET: The OC Rifle Brigade: Appendix A: Preparation Artillery Support 4th Division', 28 June 1915, 4th Division War Diary.

69 See ibid.: 'Report on action of the Artillery employed in operation of 6th July, carried out by the 11th Infantry Brigade', 10 July 1915.

70 See TNA: WO95/1442: '4th Div. No. GGG/279', 23 June 1915, 4th Division War Diary and Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914–1918*, p. 114.

71 Brigadier-General Charles Bertie Prowse DSO (1869-1916). Commissioned Somerset Light Infantry from the Militia 1892; South Africa 1899-1902; Adjutant 1st Volunteer Battalion Somerset Light Infantry/4th Somerset Light Infantry Territorial Force 1904-08; Captain and Major 1st Somerset Light Infantry 1908-14; CO 1st Leinster Regiment January 1915; GOC 11th Brigade following the death in action of his predecessor (Brigadier-General J.A. Hasler) on 27 April 1915. 11th Brigade was composed of the following infantry units: 1st Rifle Brigade, 1st Somerset Light Infantry, 1st East

order to obtain more depth of position …"[72] All details were settled between brigade and battalion headquarters by early July. 1st Rifle Brigade (CO Lieutenant-Colonel W.W. Seymour)[73] was tasked with storming International Trench; 1st Somerset Light Infantry to be placed under Seymour's command for consolidation of the captured objective. The former battalion's assault arrangements called for 'C' and 'B' companies to advance from the right and left respectively. "C Company will have its right at a point 25 yards east of the International Trench and its left at a point where our [British] trench turns north. The communication trench running south from the International [Trench] will also be available for this company as far as the new support trench." 'B' Company was tasked with extending the line from 'C' Company's left; the former's left to remain stationary on the site of its established company headquarters. 'A' Company would remain in place as immediate support in the "new support trench on the west side of the communication trench which runs south from the International [Trench]", whilst 'I' Company[74] was to occupy "Engineer Trench which runs immediately in rear and parallel to the left [B] Company's trench." The four component companies of 1st Somerset Light Infantry – under Seymour's direct orders for the duration of the assault – were to be distributed as follows: one company in position from left of the 1st East Lancashire trenches to right of 'C' Company 1st Rifle Brigade; one company in "support trench on east side of communication trench which runs south from International [Trench]"; one company under cover of the canal bank section immediately behind Engineer Trench and one company deployed near 1st Rifle Brigade headquarters.[75] Of the remaining battalions of 11th Brigade, 1st Hampshire was assigned to the immediate reserve whilst 1st East Lancashire remained in situ on the right. The 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers (12th Brigade) would be subordinated to the GOC 11th Brigade from 9:00 p.m. on the 6th for the "purpose of taking over the captured trenches in the evening"; 1st Royal Warwickshire (10th Brigade), positioned on both

Lancashire and 1st Hampshire. See Major A.F. Becke, *Order of Battle of Divisions, Part 1 – The Regular British Divisions* (London: HMSO, 1934), p. 20.

72 See TNA: WO95/1442: 'SECRET: The OC Rifle Brigade', 28 June 1915, 4th Division War Diary.

73 Lieutenant-Colonel William Walter Seymour. Commissioned Rifle Brigade 1898; Lieutenant 1900; Captain 1904; A/Major 23 November – 14 December 1914; A/Lieutenant-Colonel from 15 December 1914; mentioned in despatches June 1915.

74 Infantry battalions (Territorial Force, Indian Army and Dominion units exclusive) were reformed from eight companies per unit to a "double company" system of four companies designated 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' respectively on 1 October 1913. The 'I' Company designation appears to have been retained by 1st Rifle Brigade in lieu of the accepted 'D' Company appellation for reasons I have yet to determine.

75 See TNA: WO95/1496: 'OPERATION ORDER NO. 3 by Lt. Col. W.W. Seymour comdg. 1st Bn. BATTALION RIFLE BRIGADE', 2 July 1915, 1st Rifle Brigade War Diary.

banks of Yser Canal, and 1/6th and 1/8th West Yorkshire Regiment (49th Division), stationed in and about nearby Elverdinghe, were to be held in brigade reserve.[76]

The infantry attack plan, with its final objective limited to the seizure of International Trench and reliance on a short but intense preliminary bombardment, bore little resemblance to the earlier Dechiselle scheme. Eschewing the latter's night surprise by stealth element and dependant on the artillery to get forward, 11th Brigade envisaged a daylight advance from the vertical appendage of an L-shaped British frontline extending west to north from Fortin 17 to opposite International Trench, the latter completely enfilading the left section of the western British defences. On the immediate right, directly opposite a protruding "angle in the line at a distance of about 20 yards", lay Fortin 17. Jutting due south like a giant fist, this lowering earthwork was well within bombing range and "backed up by a heavy trench mortar." Retaliation against this strongpoint's decidedly bellicose garrison during periods of active trench warfare proved extremely difficult, "for at this time British hand grenades were still in the experimental stage and but few men had been trained in their use. Moreover, artillery ammunition was very short, and the few shells which could be spared for the Fortin merely had the effect of stirring up a wasps' nest, and drew heavy retaliation from the enemy, which destroyed parapets and caused many casualties."[77]

Adoption of the kind of linear formation still in general use at this time was unfit for purpose given the proximity of International Trench. The short distances to be traversed allowed the attackers "to simply move forward directly if the enemy had already been suppressed by artillery. Rearward units would either follow on to consolidate, or might hope to leapfrog through the more forward units at preordained moments to continue the attack."[78] The assaulting companies of 1st Rifle Brigade were to be issued marker flags "for showing the limits of their advance. These flags will be red, about eighteen inches square."[79] At the "appointed hour", 'C' Company would be tasked with storming the saphead – known to the enemy as the "*Südspitze*" – at the southern extremity of International Trench with one platoon, to be followed at a "short interval" by a second platoon. Having secured the T-head sap, this half-company was to press on north up International Trench to a point where it was "intersected by a line of iron palings." For its part, 'B' Company would storm the enemy position "from the point where it is

76 TNA: WO95/1496: '4th Division OPERATION ORDER No. 1, 4 July 1915, 1st Rifle Brigade War Diary, WO 95/1442: 'OPERATION ORDER NO. 1 by Brig-Genl. C.B. PROWSE Comdg. 11th Infantry Brigade, 3 July 1915, Appendix A: DISTRIBUTION OF INFANTRY', 4th Division War Diary, WO 95/271: 'VI Corps Operation Order No. 5', 6 July 1915, VI Corps War Diary, WO 95/1496: 'Nr 403', 5 July 1915, 1st Rifle Brigade War Diary and Everard Wyrall, *The West Yorkshire Regiment in the War1914-1918 Vol. 1* (London: John Lane, 1924), p. 98.

77 Sir Lothian Nicholson & H.T. MacMullen, *History of the East Lancashire Regiment in the Great War 1914-1918* (Liverpool: Littlebury, 1936), p. 48.

78 Griffith, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front,* pp. 53-54.

79 TNA: WO95/1442: 'OPERATION ORDER NO. 1 by Brig-Genl. C.B. PROWSE Comdg. 11th Infantry Brigade, 3 July 1915, 4th Division War Diary.

cut by the iron palings to the hedge that runs into the German trench at the elbow of the road." Eight bombing parties[80] of 10 men each would be attached to each assault company; three to 'C' Company's half-company, three to 'B' Company, the remaining two parties to "work up the hedge which runs from the south end of the ditch C 12 d [map reference] northeast corner, and will turn outwards when they reach the German trenches.[81] Each of these parties will carry a red and yellow flag which will be planted in the ground to denote the furthest point reached." With International Trench thus secured, two platoons of 'I' Company were "to rush straight through as far as the road [due east of International Trench] and proceed to dig themselves in on the line of the road." Vacated trenches were to be filled immediately by companies from the rear. Four Maxim heavy machine-guns, still a battalion asset at this time, were to "accompany the assaulting half-company of C Company and will select position commanding the German trench running east." Two additional guns were to advance on the left flank of 'B' Company, "one to command the German trench running north, the other to fire on Ferme 14." A third gun was assigned to advance with 'B' Company's centre before taking up "a central position in the captured trench." Covered access to the objective would be achieved by the rapid excavation of three communication trenches across the former no man's land by a party of 9th Field Company RE and 70 men detached from 1st Somerset Light Infantry. Proceeding up these excavated avenues of approach, carrying parties from the same battalion would further expedite the on-going consolidation of International Trench with the delivery of ammunition reserves, pre-filled sandbags, extra hand grenades and reels of barbed wire. Designated battle dress and equipage would consist of 1905 pattern stiff cap or so-called "Gor Blimey" soft forage cap, rifle, bayonet, P08 web equipment arranged in "marching order" sans packs, 200 rounds SAA, full water bottle, anti-gas apparatus[82] and two sandbags. Issue provisions were limited to the "unexpended part of the current day's ration" and iron ration.[83]

80 In these early days of bombs, there was only a limited number of trained men to use them, and these were usually organised as a battalion squad under a designated "bombing officer".

81 Issue of some 6,000 No. 5 "Mills" pattern bombs and/or No. 2 "Hales" or "Mexican" pattern percussion bombs was requested by Wilson as an urgently required substitute for the No. 8 Double Cylinder Light Pattern "Jam Tin" bombs that made up 4th Division's meagre hand grenade stockpile. The recently introduced Mills grenade was first distributed in July 1915; "A good bomb, but the early issues were more dangerous to thrower than enemy." See TNA: WO95/1442: '4th Div. No. GGG/29', 26 June 1915, 4th Division War Diary and author drawing in Hitchcock, *Stand To!*, p. 61.

82 Although the officially designated "Smoke Helmet" with oblong mica window had been issued throughout the BEF during July 1915, it is possible that the assault troops of 11th Brigade still carried the extemporized "black gauze rag tied round the face, with a piece of guncotton soaked with a hypo solution, held between the teeth" arrangement introduced in May. See author drawing in Hitchcock, *Stand To!*, p. 53.

83 TNA: WO95/1496: 'OPERATION ORDER NO. 3 by Lt. Col. W.W. Seymour comdg. 1st Bn. BATTALION RIFLE BRIGADE', 2 July 1915, 1st Rifle Brigade War Diary and WO 95/1442: '4th Div. No. GGG/279/6', 3 July 1915, 4th Division War Diary.

Designs to deceive and distract a vigilant enemy with a distinct advantage in observation facilities and supporting artillery were of particular importance prior to and during the assault.[84] To this end, 4th Division's component 10th Brigade (Brigadier-General C.P.A. Hull) and 12th Brigade (Brigadier-General F.G. Anley) were to make "every effort … to create the impression that an attack is to be delivered from their front" i.e., to the right of 11th Brigade's sector respectively. "When the bombardment starts at 5 a.m. on 6th July they [brigades] will not open fire unless a favourable target present itself [,] but at the hour of assault (6 a.m.) they will open fire with a view to preventing movement in the German lines." Support fire would be provided on the right of 11th Brigade by 1st East Lancashire which, in an effort to distract the garrison of Fortin 17, was to "open rifle and machine-gun fire and throw bombs when the assault takes place", while 2 additional machine-guns deployed west of the canal were to "fire up the valley south of FERME 14 and on the slopes leading down the hedge east of the farm …" [85] On the left, support by the French *45th Division* would be confined to trench mortar fire "on the first and second line trenches as far south as the Farm [14?] and also to the north of the railway." Eight "Maxims" were to be "stationed on the canal road between PILCKEM road corner and Station Farm, and will fire on the ground north of the farm until 6-0 a.m."[86]

Two German sapheads, a new excavation "being dug down hedges" opposite 1st Rifle Brigade's left flank and the aforementioned T-headed lair at the southern extremity of International Trench, posed a serious threat of deadly enfilade fire brought to bear against exposed companies endeavouring to reach the enemy parapet.[87] Special measures to eliminate these troublesome trench appendages would have to be devised if the infantry were to traverse no man's land without crippling losses. The former would be dealt with by the artillery barrage; the latter by a single 18-pdr deployed in the front-line trench prior to zero hour. It was Wilson that first proposed placing an artillery piece within the fire trench as a means of "blowing in the head of a German trench and of cutting wire at short range." His initial request for a "subsection of mountain artillery" appears to have been superseded by the subsequent deployment of a field gun detached from 135th Battery RFA.[88] This novel approach to the demolition of a heavily wired and revetted saphead may have had its origins in the similar and effec-

84 German dominance of the British trenches in this sector is particularly evident in a photograph reproduced in Cooksey, *Flanders 1915*, p. 124.

85 TNA: WO95/1496: '4th Division OPERATION ORDER No. 1, 4 July 1915, 1st Rifle Brigade War Diary and WO 95/1442: 'OPERATION ORDER NO. 1 by Brig-Genl. C.B. PROWSE Comdg. 11th Infantry Brigade, 3 July 1915, Appendix A: DISTRIBUTION OF INFANTRY', 4th Division War Diary.

86 TNA: WO95/1442: 'Narrative of Operations 6–10 July 1915', 4th Division War Diary.

87 TNA: WO95/1496: 'Nr 403', 5 July 1915, 1st Rifle Brigade War Diary.

88 TNA: WO95/1442: Wilson to VI Corps HQ "Secret & Pressing", 27 June 1915, 4th Division War Diary and WO 95/1455: Major J.V.P. Hawksley (CO 135th Battery) to Adjutant 52nd Brigade RFA, 9 July1915, 4th Division Artillery War Diary.

tive deployment of two and six 18-pdrs respectively during the opening phases of the battles of Aubers Ridge (9 May 1915) and Festubert (15-25 May 1915).[89] The direct correlation of this solution to a thorny tactical predicament and two tactical aspects of First Army's spring offensive in Artois is difficult to substantiate. However, it seems fair to speculate that Wilson and Keir would, in their capacity as mid-level formation commanders – the latter with gunner antecedents – have been well aware of the latest artillery developments in and outside Second Army.

Communications would rely on field telephone, telegraph and visual signalling arrangements; all messages to be dispatched by telegraph, "alternative visual by DIETZ discs[90] and lamps" arranged for. A main telegraph line to the left (1st Rifle Brigade) and right (1st East Lancashire) battalions was "sunk two feet six inches below ground, except across the canal where it was weighted and sunk to the bottom." A buried cable extending from XXXII Field Artillery's observation station to 1st Rifle Brigade was also placed in preparation for the attack. Canal bridge maintenance and security would be the responsibility of the "West Lancs Field Company RE who are responsible for the repairing of the bridges" and "will be notified at once by telephone if any of the bridges are damaged."[91] Medical arrangements called for Advanced Dressing Stations [ADS] to be established at Hull's Farm and Lodi Farm by No.12 Field Ambulance. One bearer subdivision "would be posted at [the] east bank of the canal in communication trench leading to Bridge 6D", the somewhat erroneously purported "Blighty Bridge" for "rarely did anyone hit whilst crossing the bridge return home." Serving the northern "Zwanhoff Farm sector", this structure would, in addition to bridges 6E and 6F, be one of three main crossing points available

89 See Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1915 Vol. 2,* p. 34 and Lieutenant-Colonel A. Kearsey, *1915 Campaign in France: The Battles of Aubers Ridge, Festubert & Loos Considered in Relation to the Field Service Regulations Second Edition* (Uckfield: Naval & Military Press reprint of 1929 edition), p. 34.

90 The "Dietz Disc", patented by Colonel B.R. Dietz of 7th Dragoon Guards in 1908, would, according to *The Morning Post*, probably displace flag signalling as a primary means of battlefield communication. The device consisted of a "disc about one foot in diameter with a hollow metal handle. On the disc is a semi-circular flap, working in a spindle operated by a bolt action, which, at the will of the operator, displays an entirely white or entirely black disc. The 'longs' and 'shorts' of a Morse code are thus made readable by changing from black to white and vice versa. The portion of the apparatus directed towards the enemy is splashed with invisible color, and is therefore difficult to discern even at close quarters, while it is in no case possible for the signals to be read from the rear. On a dull day a message can be read, with the naked eye at a distance of 2,000 yards and with the aid of glasses the signal has been read up to 6,000 yards. Among the special advantages of the disc signal is that it may be used while the operator is lying down." See *Page's Weekly* op. cit., in *Journal of the United States Artillery* Volume 31:1 (January-February 1909), p. 216.

91 TNA: WO95/1489: 'COMMUNICATIONS' (n.d.), 'OPERATION ORDER NO. 1 by Brig-Genl. C.B. PROWSE Comdg. 11th Infantry Brigade', 3 July 1915 and accompanying 'Appendix B: Communications 11th Bde' map, 11 Brigade War Diary.

to all arms throughout the attack. Wounded were to be passed on to this subdivision by regimental stretcher-bearers who, in turn, would "receive stretchers from the bearer subdivision in place of the ones occupied by the wounded" which, "on receipt will immediately return to their regimental aid posts." The seriously wounded were to be transported across Bridge 6D by subdivision bearers and "thence along the canal bank as far as Bridge 6B, at which point they will be carried direct to dressing station in HULL'S FARM." Walking wounded were to be directed "down the communication trench along the east bank of the canal to No. 6 Pontoon Bridge, which bridge they will cross and proceed to dressing station at LODI FARM."[92]

Commencing in mid-June, 4th Division's attack preparations had been carried out in the "most elaborate detail" under intense conditions of active trench warfare, the unofficial "live and let live" compact that existed during French occupation of the unpleasant canal bank sector now relegated to the recent past.[93] The period 22–30 June in VI Corps' sector was, a Second Army summary concluded, one of a "great deal of hard work" to improve "fire and communication trenches, but owing to the short nights work was difficult and several casualties occurred among the digging parties. Otherwise, the period under review has passed quietly." VI Corps casualties (589 officers and men killed, wounded and missing) from sniping, mine explosions, gas, artillery and trench mortar fire, etc., belied the perceived inactivity and represented 31 percent of Second Army's combined losses of 1,887 over the same ten day period.[94] The wet June weather gave way to an oppressively hot July.[95] The first five days of the new month, the next Second Army summary remarked, "passed quietly on the front of the neighbouring 6th Division, but there was considerable activity on the front of the 4th Division, both before and after the enterprise of July 6th, the trenches in front and back lines – and especially the canal bank – have been frequently shelled, gas shells being often used." A small but successful night raid, executed on 4 July by a platoon of 2nd Seaforth Highlanders and an accompanying RE demolition party, that eliminated an enemy saphead opposite 10th Brigade represented the only noteworthy offensive activity on VI Corps' front prior to the imminent assault on International Trench.[96]

92 TNA: WO95/1489: '11th Infantry Brigade Copy No. 2', 4 July 1915, 4th Division War Diary, 'OPERATION ORDER NO. 1 by Brig-Genl. C.B. PROWSE Comdg. 11th Infantry Brigade', 3 July 1915, accompanying 'Appendix C: Aid Posts' map, 11 Brigade War Diary and McGreal, *Boesinghe*, p. 46.

93 Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914–1918*, p. 116.

94 TNA: WO95/271: 'SUMMARY OF OPERATIONS – Second Army: from 22 of June to 30 June 1915, both dates inclusive', Second Army War Diary. 4th Division's losses for June amounted to 38 officers and 895 other ranks.

95 Wyrall, *The West Yorkshire Regiment in the War 1914–1918*, p. 97.

96 TNA: WO95/271: 'SUMMARY OF OPERATIONS – Second Army: from – 1st to 7th July 1915 (both dates inclusive)', Second Army War Diary, WO 95/1478: 'Appendix 1: Operation Order by Lt. Colonel R.L. Vandeleur CMG', 4 July 1915, 10 Brigade War Diary, WO 95/1483, 2nd Seaforth Highlanders War Diary and WO 95/1442: 'REPORT

Stellung vor Pilkem

The *46th Reserve Division* (Schleswig Holstein, Hanseatic Cities and Grand Duchies of Mecklenburg) was responsible for the defence of the Pilckem sector since termination of the Second Battle of Ypres by the German high command in May 1915. A component formation of *XXIII Reserve Corps* – one of four new army corps raised at the behest of Prussian War Minister and Chief of the General Staff Erich von Falkenhayn in autumn 1914 – it had sustained severe manpower losses during First and Second Ypres before settling into trenches between Dixmude and Ypres with *45th Reserve Division*.[97]

The sector assigned to *46th Reserve Division's* component *Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 213* [*RIR 213*] and *Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 215* [*RIR 215*][98] was divided into two frontline subsectors; *Kanalsappe* (Canal-Sap) north of the Ypres – Roulers railway line and *Neuesappe* (New-Sap), comprising the first line of defence for the outlying Pilckem defences, to the south. By early July, the situation in "Sector C" of the latter was deemed "particularly precarious." This was where "the front line north of the embankment, running adjacent to the canal, crossed to the south to become the worm-like 'Canal-Sap', whereas the actual battle line east of the Ypres [*Yperlee*] stream, echeloned to the original position and parallel with the canal, was some 300 metres distant from it." Well aware of the threat to this exposed flank, the defenders "were forced to extend the approach trench, which led from K50 at right angles to the east of strongpoint Max [Zouave House], west of the water tower, and into the position on the right wing of Sector C, linking it to the Canal-Sap, thus closing the open flank." Safeguarding this area from enemy incursions, *RIR 213* and *RIR 215* were expected to "defend the part of the line east of [Canal-Sap], and … to make a crossing of the canal by the enemy at this point impossible … It cost a great deal of toil and sweat … but it was completed and the Ypres 'ring' resolutely closed." The British, however, refused to remain passive, pushing "forward a 'Canal-Sap' of their own, along the canal from the south, and also, sheltered by a hedge from our New-Sap, dug a counter-sap in an easterly direction towards it. This activity by both sides meant that a bitter struggle, ending in heavy losses, was inevitable."[99] Ever watchful of the

BY OC SEAFORTH HIGHLANDERS ON ASSAULT OF GERMAN SAP-HEAD ON 4th JULY', 6 July 1915, 4th Division War Diary. McGreal mistakenly confuses the saphead (situated to the south opposite British map reference E.29) in question with the northern sap emanating from International Trench. See McGreal, *Boesinghe*, pp. 50-51 and TNA: WO95/1442: 'WAR DIARY. 4-7-15', 4th Division War Diary.

97 Intelligence Section of the General Staff, American Expeditionary Forces, *Histories of Two Hundred and Fifty-One Divisions of the German Army Which Participated in the War 1914-1918* (London: London Stamp Exchange, 1989 reprint of 1920 edition), pp. 469-72.

98 Infantry orders of battle for *46th Reserve Division* at this time was as follows: *Reserve infanterie-regiments Nr. 213*, *Nr. 214*, *Nr. 215*, *Nr. 216* and *18th Reserve Jäger Battalion*.

99 Max Tiessen, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 213* (Glückstadt: Augustin, 1937), pp. 253-54. I am indebted to University of Birmingham colleague Derek

encroaching "English" across the way, occupation of the grim *Neuesappe* sub-sector was an equally nerve-wracking experience, as this harrowing descriptive passage from *RIR 213's* post-war regimental history attests:

> Tension was in the air. Attempts by both sides to push saps forward meant, particularly at night that sleep was impossible, the heads of both the "New" and "Canal" saps had to be secured by groups of men against enemy attack. The long grass restricted observation and the night wind made it sway like a cornfield, the howling noise horrifying even to the bravest of soldiers. Were they coming? Was someone creeping there? Listen out! … We were ecstatic when midnight had passed and the work party marched out, its task over by 2–2:30 a.m.[100]

Countdown to Zero

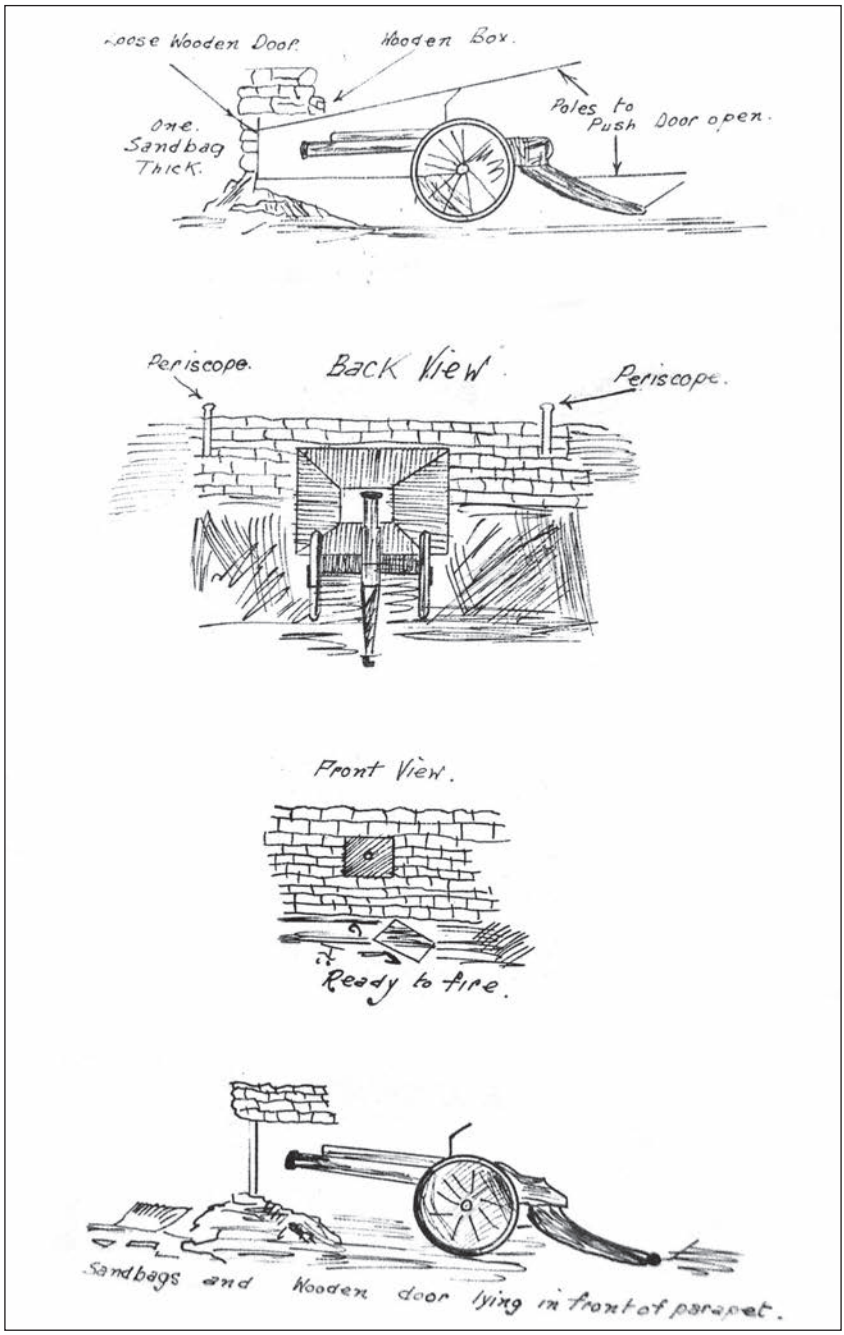
Monday 5 July was, with the exception of some heavy high explosive and gas shell bombardments on left of 1st Rifle Brigade, fairly quiet by the recognised local standards of 4th Division's three-brigade canal bank front. 1st Somerset Light Infantry, having relieved 1st Rifle Brigade in the frontline on the night of 30 June/1 July, was relieved in turn by the former the previous evening. It was during the course of the following day that three officers of 1st Rifle Brigade's left assault company were lost (one killed and two wounded) during the intense shelling. This tragedy had little effect on final attack preparations which were complete except for the support "accommodation trenches" that, Division HQ was assured, would be ready that evening.[101] It was after his battalion arrived at Elverdinghe Chateau that Sergeant Cook of 1st Somerset Light Infantry noted: "The Brigadier [Prowse] lectured us on the attack which is to take place tomorrow." With the coming of nightfall, barbed wire defences had to be "loosened", so that they "could be moved quickly", whilst sandbag reserves and RE stores were accumulated at specially designated dump sites. Descending flares and German searchlight beams illuminated the darkness as 'D' Company, 1st East Lancashire Regiment "dug a communication from the canal to the aid-post at Hull's Farm."[102] Following this, sentries having been posted after the nightly "Stand To"

Clayton for German language translation assistance throughout this chapter.

100 Ibid., p. 256.

101 See TNA: WO95/271: 'Summary of Operations Second Army from – 1st to 7th July 1915 (both dates inclusive)', Second Army War Diary, WO 95/1442: 'War Diary – 5th July 1915', 4th Division War Diary, WO 95/1489: 'OPERATION REPORT, week ended 8–0 a.m. 7/7/15', 11 Brigade War Diary and WO 95/1496: 1st Rifle Brigade War Diary.

102 Molesworth (ed), *A Soldier's War*, p. 41, TNA: WO95/1489: 'OPERATION REPORT, week ended 8–0 a.m. 7/7/15', 11 Brigade War Diary and Nicholson & MacMullen, *History of the East Lancashire Regiment in the Great War 1914–1918,* p. 50.



2nd Lieutenant Robinson's drawings of the hidden gun position. (TNA: WO 95/1455)

routine and issue of a welcome rum ration, the officers and men of 1st Rifle Brigade awaited the coming of dawn.[103]

Meanwhile, the single 18-pdr of 135th Battery RFA was situated in place opposite the southern sap of International Trench. The battery CO, Major J.P.V. Hawksley, subsequently observed in a special after action report to 4th Division HQ: "Every little detail was thought out and nothing left to chance." Tasked with transport of the gun across the canal before manhandling it overland to a previously prepared position, was a battery subsection consisting of 2nd Lieutenant W.P.A. Robinson[104] and a small band of volunteer NCOs and men. Prior reconnaissance by Hawksley and Robinson on the night of 27/28 June determined which one of three possible positions would be the most suitable. Following this, Robinson "took the measurement of the trench at this position and on that day (29th) and the next (30th), I [Robinson] had an exact facsimile of the trench, as it then stood, dug in the 135th Battery wagon line." The frontline trench section facsimile complete, Robinson and 2nd Lieutenant R.L. Withington 9th Field Company RE[105] considered what alterations were necessary to camouflage the gun from an enemy just 70 yards distant: "We came to the conclusion that a hollow wooden box should be placed in the parapet which would allow the muzzle of the gun to protrude through and yet resemble the parapet until the moment of opening fire." Constructed by the REs, this pre-fabricated timber "epaulment" [sic][106] was successfully fitted into the previously constructed practice trench along with the field gun "as much in the manner" as "taking it into the actual trench as was possible." The succeeding four-day period was taken up with rigorous gun crew drills, instrument tests, a visit to the forward area for targeting calculations and organisation of transportation arrangements that included the bridging of the *Yprelee* stream running parallel with the British side of the Yser Canal and the canal itself. Working parties supplied by a battalion of 49th Division cut grass and filled in shell-holes along the pre-determined route to the gun position after nightfall. Three communications trench obstructions deemed necessary for the infantry were left intact by the labourers.[107] Gun – "harnesses muffled" – ammunition (50% Trotyl HE and 50% shrapnel) and wooden parapet construction were moved forward and emplaced by stages on the nights of 4/5 and 5/6 July, Robinson vividly recounting the joint efforts of infantry, sapper and gunner in his three-page after-action report:

103 TNA: WO95/1496: 'With Reference to Operation Order No. 1 of 3/7/15', 4 July 1915, 1st Rifle Brigade War Diary.
104 William Parr Aldous Robinson (1896-1978). Commissioned Royal Artillery February 1915.
105 Lieutenant Robert L. Withington. Commissioned Royal Engineers April 1914.
106 Épaulement: French term for "shoulder" (*épaule*) or shoulder of a bastion or outwork for flank protection.
107 TNA: WO95/1442: 'Adj. 32nd Brig. RFA', 9 July 1915 and 'Reference procedure of 18 pdr QF Gun in trenches', 10 July 1915, 4th Division War Diary.

We went by road to TUGELA FARM, the observing station of our battery … from there we went to the canal bank at a walk, the drivers bending right down over their horses' necks and halting when flares went up. When we got to the stream on the British side of the Canal Bank, the teams were halted, the gun unlimbered and the ammunition dumped. The gun was manhandled across the bridge across the stream aided by a carrying party of 30 West Yorks[108] and manhandled up the ramp on the British side of the Canal Bank. The gun was there handed over to Lieutenant Withington R.E., who had prepared a pontoon raft.[109] The digging of the epaulment was then started by a party of 10 West Yorks. On this night we were greatly hindered by the firing of gas shells by the enemy. We had to work in smoke helmets for 1 ½ hours. We were also hindered by the fact that the Somerset L.I. were relieving the Rifle Brigade. On this night … there were [sic] also a second working party of 10 West Yorks who dug wheel tracks one foot deep for the last 30 yards of the way, that is to say from the bridge to the trench, so to sink the gun one foot lower for that part of the journey. The detachments dugouts were than chosen and strengthened by the sappers … A 7' gap was cut in the trench we had to cross. On the morning of 5th July then this was then the state of affairs. The gun was resting on the German side of the Canal Bank covered with a tarpaulin, branches and barbed wire transoms to cover it from aerial observation. The ammunition was just by the gun similarly concealed. The road from the canal to the position was made, sunk one foot for the last 30 yards of the journey. A gap had been cut in the hedge to go through. The communication trenches had been left unbridged to enable the infantry to pass. The epaulment had only been half dug because of the enemy's gas shell. The parapet was still intact … the epaulment was sapped out from the inside by three sappers and a sapper NCO, and finished. A wooden framework for the gun was made by the sappers under Lieutenant Withington RE to be covered with canvas and bushes in order to hide the gun when bringing up. On the night 5th/6th July the moon got up at 11:23 p.m., two things were done simultaneously: I. The box was put in the parapet. The box was 4 feet square with a detachable sloping front, which could be covered with sandbags and earth and resemble the trench. To put this in, it was necessary to pull down the parapet on a front of 5 feet. To do this a screen of partli-coloured [sic] canvas on a wooden frame 10ft x 4ft was put over the parapet, so that the enemy should not see a gap … Under cover of the screen, the parapet was pulled down and the box put in. II. The gun was taken from its resting place on the German side of the Canal Bank, and with a carrying party

108 Detached elements of 1/8th West Yorkshire Regiment.

109 An imaginative lithograph of "Second Lieutenant Robinson conveying a field gun across the Yser Canal under fire" by Arthur Paine Garratt was reproduced in *Deeds That Thrilled the Empire* (London: Hutchison, 1920).

of 30 West Yorks, was hauled up the ramp, across the fields through the hedge, and into the position.[110]

Removed from its camouflaged resting place, the gun had been towed along the trail leading to the prepared emplacement. "Whenever a flare went up [,] the men on the drag-ropes at once fell flat and remained lying down until it was dark again." Previously noted communication trench obstacles "were bridged one by one" with lumber supplied by the REs. The gun now situated, "cubby holes were dug for ammunition" and all HE and shrapnel projectiles stowed within. Of this hidden gun emplacement, Hawksley effusively observed: "The position [20 yards west of International Trench] was ideal. From it no possible enemy observation posts were visible, no flanking rifle or machine-gun fire, and indeed the only people who could have worried the gun with direct fire were those in the German saphead of the International Trench …" Their exertions at an end by 2:00 a.m. on the 6th, Robinson's fatigued gun crew rested until 3:45 a.m. when "all ammunition was again tested to avoid breech jams and the fuzes were set …"[111]

Bombardment

Sunrise at 3:41 a.m. revealed an overgrown battlefield landscape dotted with still verdant spinneys, queues of thoroughfare poplars, burgeoning hedges and shell-scarred farm structures. Sandbagged and timbered trench lines of the opposing armies wove their way through dense, gas discoloured summer fields and pastures that obscured numerous shell holes, long forgotten corpses, decaying animal carcasses and the scattered detritus of war.[112] Brigade HQs reported "quiet" with a "light wind S.W." at 4:00 a.m. The prospect of a bright, clear day for observation purposes was dashed at approximately 4:45 a.m. by a rising mist that "came up from the canal" and did not fully dissipate until the "early stages of the operation" had passed. "By 5-0

110 TNA: WO95/1442: 'Reference procedure of 18 pdr QF Gun in trenches', 10 July 1915, 4th Division War Diary.

111 TNA: WO95/1442: 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915' and 'Adj. 32nd Brig. RFA', 9 July 1915 and 'Reference procedure of 18 pdr QF Gun in trenches', 10 July 1915, 4th Division War Diary.

112 See TNA: WO157/401: 'CALENDAR July 1915', VI Corps Intelligence File and WO 95/1442: 'Report on action of the Artillery employed in operation of 6th July, carried out by the 11th Infantry Brigade', 10 July1915, 4th Division War Diary. The general description of VI Corps area as it appeared during midsummer 1915 is based on images reproduced in Cooksey, *Flanders 1915* and Second Army panorama photograph ('2nd Army Panorama No. 6 made on 10/7/1915 from Near O.P. C. 28c 7.7 including a field view of 90° from about S.S.E. to E.N.E.') of the Wieltje sector (6th Division) possessed by the author.

a.m. one could not see more than three or four hundred yards."[113] Visibility remained poor when Phase I of the British bombardment, commencing at 5:00 a.m., broke the relative calm:

> At precisely 6 a.m. [continental time], heavy artillery fire fell on the entire front line as far as 52 RD [*52nd Reserve Division*], on the strongpoints and on the approach trenches. Eight enemy planes circled above the position. According to an English military despatch of 7 July, and according to an intercepted radio message, French artillery and "Bomb-throwers" played a large part in this barrage … Individual detonations became indistinct, one from the other. Our Minenwerfer fired at the enemy saps … 28 cm shells and heavy mines ploughed up our position. Very soon the machine-gun in the Südspitze was destroyed by direct hits.[114]

Wire cutting field batteries and trench mortars[115] bombarded the *cheveaux de fries* obstacles covering International Trench for 30 minutes, divided into three periods of 10 minutes each with three minute intervals between each period. The enemy's wire defences, described by Brigadier-General R.F. Fox (GOC 4th Division Artillery) as being of the "knife rest pattern, three [rows] deep", were "completely demolished" prior to Zero:

> The section of 18-pdrs enfilading it [barbed wire] fired Trotyl on percussion from one gun and shrapnel with long corrector[116] on the other. The former was found to be the more effective of the two. The trench howitzers were found to be very effective against this class of wire, and the O.C. battery claims to have entirely demolished 60 yards of it with 140 bombs. On one occasion he saw four knife rests in the air at once from one bomb.[117]

At the same time, guns and howitzers of V Corps, VI Corps and *XXXVI Corps* undertook Phase I of the destructive bombardment while BE2c aircraft of No. 5

113 TNA: WO95/1442: 'Narrative of Operations, 6th – 10th July 1915' and 'WAR DIARY 6-7-15', 4th Division War Diary.

114 Hans Willers, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 215 Vol. 1* (Oldenberg: Stalling, 1926), p. 278. Of the two relevant German regimental histories (*RIR 213* and *RIR 215*) consulted that of *RIR 215* appears to have been written in the style of an ex post facto annotated contemporary war diary.

115 Field guns and trench mortars employed for wire-cutting were as follows: One section of 18-pdrs at a range of 1,750 yards; one section of 18-pdrs at a range of approximately 2,000 yards firing practically in enfilade. The portion fired on by this section was also engaged by 2-inch trench mortars; one 1.57 inch trench mortar battery.

116 Corrector: Adjustment of time fuze duration in order to compensate for changing atmospheric conditions and range the height of burst.

117 TNA: WO95/1442: 'Report on action of the Artillery employed in operation of 6th July, carried out by the 11th Infantry Brigade', 10 July1915, 4th Division War Diary.

Squadron RFC circled overhead. Swathes of dust and smoke enveloped German defences inundated by shellfire. Shattered sandbags, splintered revetments and the occasional body or torn fragment of humanity could be discerned rising to great heights from the inferno before plummeting back to earth again:

> The enemy artillery was dazzlingly well-directed: every shot landed in the trench. A direct hit from a 28 cm smashed 9th Coy's ammunition dump, along with 200 hand grenades, 6,000 rounds and a large quantity of Minenwerfer projectiles. The store went up in an enormously powerful explosion which buried or deafened those standing close by.[118]

The opening of the bombardment was also the signal for the masked 18-pdr opposite the southern sap of International Trench to open fire. Supported by a "salvo" from 26th Trench Mortar Battery, Robinson's gun crew engaged the target:

> The saphead appeared to be demolished by the 50 rounds of Trotyl at 70 yards range. After having demolished the saphead, the gun was turned on to the wire on the left side of the saphead facing the enemy which appeared also to be extensively piled up and out. Our 100 rounds were fired in 9 minutes, after which the detachment retired into dugouts for half-an-hour, and then back to the Battery. There was only one casualty, and this did not take place in the actual firing of the gun.[119]

Battery CO Hawksley later remarked with some satisfaction: "The first round being a well- directed one, these people [sap garrison] were otherwise employed" and unable to engage their unexpected assailants with small arms fire and hand grenades.[120]

118 Willers, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 215 Vol. 1*, p. 279.

119 TNA: WO95/1442: 'Reference procedure of 18 pdr QF Gun in trenches', 10 July 1915, 4th Division War Diary.

120 Ibid.: 'Adj. 32nd Brig. RFA', 9 July 1915. Hawksley also observed that "there is an idea that the detachment was affected by the rapid fire and became concussed. This is not at all the case, they fired calmly on until the last round was expanded. The only one affected, and he not till afterwards, was 2nd/Lieut. Robinson, who felt the strain of the previous days and relief at the successful ending." The gun was subsequently removed the following evening in the same manner it was brought in, Robinson receiving an MC for this and earlier efforts. Lieutenant Withington also received the MC for his part. Major, later Lieutenant-Colonel, John Plunkett Verney Hawksley DSO was KIA in August 1916. The Germans subsequently learned of the hidden gun ruse from the British media: "According to a report in an English newspaper the enemy managed, with great difficulty, to get a large calibre artillery piece across the canal during the night and dug it in to a position from which it was able directly to shell the Südspitze from close range." See Willers, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 215 Vol. 1*, p. 278.

The reduction in fire as stipulated in Phase II (5:40 to 5:50 a.m.) provided artillery observation officers with the opportunity to take stock of results thus far despite prevailing mist that handicapped visibility:

> Weather fine but foggy, and the observers were at first unable to see the result of their fire which was however very effective. It was reported that the first shell from the 9.2 inch howitzer was a direct hit on the German parapet, and blew a large portion of it into the air, the sandbags bursting and showers of dust coming down.[121]

Phase III of the bombardment (5:50 to 6:00 a.m.) preceded the infantry attack, 4th Division HQ receiving successive encouraging messages from 1st East Lancashire and XXXII Field Artillery Brigade that the "artillery was doing good work in front of them" and "the wire from end of appendix [northern sap] for 10 or 15 yards appeared to be cut. Also from palings to barricade, but mist impeded observation."[122] However, the artillery battle was far from one-sided. German retaliatory fire, first concentrated on the British assault trenches, managed to inflict heavy losses, including two officers of 1st Rifle Brigade, despite Allied counter-battery fire – "From 5:30 a.m. on the 6th to the afternoon of the 8th, the enemy's shellfire never ceased day or night."[123]

"We are the boys of the Rifle Brigade doing our bit with rifle and blade …"

It was four days prior to the assault (2 July) that a Tommy of 1st Somerset Light Infantry wrote home about a recent tangible manifestation of his battalion's friendly rivalry with 1st Rifle Brigade: "When we went into the trenches the other day to do a spell we found a piece of paper with the word 'Notice' on it." On examination it was identified as a piece of boastful doggerel verse left behind for their express edification by the men of the "Prince Consort's Own."[124] Good natured inter-regimental ribbing

121 TNA: WO95/1442: 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915', 4th Division War Diary.
122 Ibid.
123 Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918*, p. 116, TNA: WO95/1442: 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915', 4th Division War Diary and McGreal, *Boesinghe*, p. 52.
124 Bursting with regimental pride and dubious literary merit, it read as follows:
We are the boys of the Rifle Brigade,
doing our bit with rifle and blade.
Holding the trenches at a well-known spot,
we're not satisfied without little lot.
Marking our fame in the sands of time,
we are holding the Germs on the left of the line.
As you should know (for it's commonly known)
that we belong to the Prince Consort's Own.
Some say we're sweeps because of our dress,

set aside for the time being, the rival units, having consumed a "good breakfast" on Brigadier-General Prowse's express orders, anticipated the barrage lifting forward and zero hour.[125]

Zero hour 6:00 a.m., 11th Brigade's assault and support battalions were deployed as follows: Left sector – 1st Rifle Brigade with four machine-guns; 1st Somerset Light Infantry in support with four machine-guns. Right sector – 1st East Lancashire Regiment with four machine-guns; one company of 1st Hampshire Regiment in support on east canal bank. Deployed west of the canal were the remaining three companies of 1st Hampshire, 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers and 1/8th West Yorkshire Regiment. On the right, 10th Brigade "put two machine-guns into position on east bank of canal … with two companies of [1st] WARWICKS on east bank of canal, remainder on west bank."[126]

On the whistle blast, 'C' Company (Captain G.M.A. Ellis) and 'B' Company (Lieutenant D.R. Brandt) 1st Rifle Brigade – "swords" affixed to rifles[127] – vacated the shelter of their frontline position and rushed through the lingering morning mist, "Captain O.C. Downes, the second in command, advancing with the first line in command of the attack", on International Trench. "The distance traversed was less than fifty yards; but within five minutes of zero all the officers were out of action." On the right, 'C' Company, having lost 2nd Lieutenants P.C.B. Blair and G.F. Juckes[128] killed and Lieutenant G.W. Barclay and CSM Bradley wounded by shellfire just moments before jumping-off, passed through uprooted and broken *cheveaux de fries* to enter the objective from the destroyed southern sap to its pre-arranged junction with 'B' Company.[129] Clambering over tumbledown sandbag piles with a *Feldgrau*-clad arm or jack-booted foot protruding here and there amongst the accumulated debris, bombers and riflemen consolidated under the command of 2nd Lieutenant C.N.C. Boyle, the sole remaining company officer, who fell injured shortly afterwards. He was succeeded by 2nd Lieutenant R.I.V. Birbeck "who led across the remaining platoons of 'C' Company …" Meantime, 'B' Company, reportedly having "walked into the

what do we care? We can abow all the rest,
yes show them how and they know we've had bags.
Just have a look at the old cap badge.
1st Somerset Light Infantry stretcher-bearers responded in kind with an equally boastful couplet. See Simon Hughes, 'Operations on the Yser Canal: The 1st Battalion Somerset Light Infantry and analysis of its part in the attack on International Trench 6th July 1915' < http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/the-great-war/great-war-on-land/battlefields/317-operations-on-yser-canal.html>

125 TNA: WO95/1496: 'With Reference to Operation Order No. 1 of 3/7/15', 4 July 1915, 1st Rifle Brigade War Diary.

126 TNA: WO95/1442: 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915', 4th Division War Diary.

127 Bayonets were traditionally referred to as "swords" in the Rifle Brigade.

128 2nd Lieutenants Patrick Charles Bentley Blair and G.F. Juckes are buried in Talana Farm Cemetery.

129 Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914–1918*, p. 116.

German trenches", lost Company Commander Lieutenant Brandt shot through the heart on reaching the enemy parapet. With Captains Downes and Ellis lying wounded in no man's land, command devolved on to CSM F. Hedges until the arrival (6:11 a.m.) of Captain C.J. Gasson and three platoons of 'I' Company "less one platoon, despite heavy machine-gun fire from Farm 14, which wounded 2nd Lieutenant C.L. Bullock and caused a number of other casualties … This party however had passed through a very trying experience, for a 9-in. howitzer shell intended for an enemy machine-gun scored a direct hit on the British parapet as they were leaving and caused indescribable confusion."[130]

However, the defenders were in an equally confused state. Reeling from the bombardment, the hapless trench garrison of *RIR 215* was completely overwhelmed: "The enemy got into the somewhat levelled trenches of 9th Coy. … A bayonet and grenade fight ensued. Our troops, weakened by artillery fire and gas [sic] were unable to stop the incursion. The crew of the machine gun were heroically taken prisoner …"[131] Surviving German infantry, sheltering in dugouts since the start of the bombardment, were rooted out at the point of a bayonet or exterminated with bombs that wreaked grisly havoc inside low-roofed and timber-panelled recesses situated just below the parapet.[132] Others were cut-off and bayoneted in communication trenches by bombing parties organised into groups of "4 grenadiers (one of whom should act as group leader), 3 bayonet men, and some sandbag men each carrying slung rifle, a shovel and a bundle of sandbags." These fast-moving grenadier sub-units, red marker flags indicating their progress just visible above the parapet, were trailed by "another group of 4 grenadiers ready to replace any of the first party who may become casualties or who expend all their grenades and have to refill."[133] Bombing officer 2nd Lieutenant B. Gibbs and his assistant Sergeant P. Baynes[134] were killed outright, their place taken by Sergeant F. Stone who, "despite his inexperience of bombs, took charge …" This ignorance quickly manifested itself when he "was chased round three traverses by a German with a bayonet before he mastered the mechanism of the short Hales bomb, tore out the pin by the sacrifice of a front tooth, turned on his pursuer and destroyed him."[135]

130 TNA: WO95/1442: 'WAR DIARY 6-7-15', 4th Division War Diary and Berkley, p. 116, 118. Lieutenant Robert Druce Brandt has no known grave and is commemorated on the Menin Gate. A former Oxford Mods Don, further details of Brandt's short life are available at <https://llewelynmorgan.wordpress.com/tag/brandt/>

131 Willers, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 215 Vol. 1*, p. 280. The assertion that the British employed gas during this operation is erroneous.

132 See Cooksey, *Flanders 1915*, p. 115 for an interior photograph of one of these dugouts.

133 TNA: WO95/1442: 'WAR DIARY 6-7-15' and 'Narrative of Operations 6–10 July 1915' and '4th Div. No. GGG/279', 23 June 1915, 4th Division War Diary.

134 2nd Lieutenant Bernard Gibbs is buried in Talana Farm Cemetery. Z/421 Sergeant Philip Heacock Baynes has no known grave and is commemorated on the Menin Gate.

135 Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914–1918*, fn.'†', p. 118.

Thus secured, International Trench presented a sobering scene of smoky devastation: "The trenches and dugouts were choked with German dead and littered with letters and parcels. Evidently the mail had just arrived. Some kind of meal had been in progress, for there was an abundance of hot coffee which was eagerly consumed by the raiders, who in addition fortified themselves with cigars." Divisional headquarters received word from 1st Rifle Brigade that all was well at 6:45 a.m. "Telephone line being laid to captured trench. Digging parties progressing with their work smoking fat cigars. 21 prisoners up to present." However, hostile fire from adjacent strongpoints continued to harass consolidation regardless of renewed shelling by supporting batteries: "In spite of the heavy bombardment to which FARM 14 and the white sandbag redoubt J had been subjected to at 6:50 a.m.[,] these points were reported strongly held by the enemy and had to be again shelled. A machine-gun from nearby BOESINGHE also gave trouble and the French were asked to shell it, which they did." By mid-morning, the Germans were organised into a rough defensive position east of International Trench – *RIR 215's* 12th, 11th, 10th companies, elements of 9th and 7th companies "holding out in the front line" and 6/215 and 12/213 in *Moritz* (situated just north of Mackensen Farm), 5/215 near *Jägerstützpunkt* (north-west of Villa Gretchen) and "11/213 position unknown. Jäger 18 warned and in Brigade reserve."[136]

'C' Company 1st Somerset Light Infantry, following in close support behind 1st Rifle Brigade, occupied the western support trench i.e., the former British frontline, whilst 'B' and 'H' companies assisted the REs with the construction of new fire and communication trenches respectively.[137] Sergeant Cook oversaw the digging of one of the latter excavations under sustained enemy fire:

> My platoon then had orders to dig a communication trench from the captured line back to our frontline. I spaced the men out, a difficult job in a very exposed position. To keep them on task I had to walk continually up and down the line. Captain Marshall, our company commander, came along to inspect the work and asked where a certain platoon sergeant was. I had to say I had not seen him. He took me with him and we found the sergeant crouched in a dugout on the canal bank. The captain took out his revolver and said, "Come out before I shoot you and go and take charge of your platoon. He came out and we started back to the frontline when, to my surprise, we ran into my platoon who had abandoned their task in my absence. I fixed my bayonet and drove them back to

136 Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918*, p. 118, TNA: WO95/1442: 'WAR DIARY 6-7-15', 'Narrative of Operations 6–10 July 1915', 4th Division War Diary and Willers, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 215 Vol. 1*, p. 282.

137 TNA WO 95/1499: 1st Somerset Light Infantry War Diary.

> their task – including the sergeant. I had to go on walking up and down the line to encourage them as the cowardly behaviour of the sergeant had demoralised them.[138]

On 1st Rifle Brigade's immediate right, 'C' and 'A' companies 1st East Lancashire Regiment commenced firing on Fortin 17 with rifles and machine-guns at Zero whilst undergoing the fierce German counter-barrage. "This fire was supplemented by hand grenades thrown by Corporal Tomlinson, who was assisted by Lance Corporal McWhite, who observed the result through a periscope." Firing ceased at 6:30 a.m. by which time 'A' Company had sustained terrible losses from shellfire; "the greater part of one platoon had been killed or wounded and Captain Alington was severely wounded but remained with his company. Captain Richards was sent up to relieve Captain Alington, who refused to leave until about 11 a.m., when the commanding officer came up the line and ordered him back; he had a severe head wound which eventually entailed the loss of an eye." Casualties continued to mount with the loss of 25 men during shelling of the nearby reserve trench.[139] Shellfire also accounted for bridges 6X and 6D which, in addition to maintenance throughout the engagement of the other crossing points, were repaired within two hours amidst the relentless bombardment by diligent work crews of the West Lancs Field Company RE.[140]

Consolidation work by the infantry and attached REs proceeded at a desirable pace behind an advanced screen of bombers "who continued to be engaged with the enemy until early on the following morning" whilst "arrangements to meet any counter-attack were well in hand" by 7:00 a.m. Notwithstanding the "hedges and some natural cover the work was directly overlooked by the Pilckem defences, whence heavy fire was opened and maintained." The bulk of the 1,600 issued bombs having been expended during the fighting, additional supplies – including 280 Mills bombs

138 Molesworth (ed), *A Soldier's War*, pp.41-42. The craven NCO, identified by recent research as 5592 Sergeant Walter J. "Rattler" Roman a former rugby international, was reduced to the rank of private for drunkenness. He subsequently died of wounds sustained on 1 July 1916 and is interred at Bridgewater (Wembdon Road) Cemetery. See Hughes, 'Operations on the Yser Canal: The 1st Battalion Somerset Light Infantry and analysis of its part in the attack on International Trench 6th July 1915'<http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/the-great-war/great-war-on-land/battlefields/317-operations-on-yser-canal.html> and 'Brothers in Arms: Walter Roman' <http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-people/brothers-arms/409-walter-roman.html>

139 TNA: WO95/1498: 1st East Lancashire War Diary, Nicholson & MacMullen, *History of the East Lancashire Regiment in the Great War 1914-1918,* p.50 and McGreal, *Boesinghe*, pp. 52-53. The neighbouring 10th Brigade subsequently reported "that they had demonstrated throughout the day by showing bayonets, removing wire in places and cheering which drew fire from 5:15 to 6:30, and shelling at various intervals during the day, Irish Fusiliers on our left fired on German supports during operations of 11th Brigade." See TNA: WO95/1442: 'WAR DIARY 6-7-15', 4th Division War Diary.

140 TNA: WO95/1442: 'WAR DIARY 6-7-15' and 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915', 4th Division War Diary.

– and machine-gun ammunition were immediately dispatched forward by designated carrying parties. Artillery observers "kept a sharp and never ceasing lookout on and behind the enemy lines …"[141] Local British superiority in quantities of issue hand grenades, a rare albeit short-lived occurrence during 1915, appeared evident throughout the 6 July fighting: "For every one of our grenades, Tommy answered with five or six of his own – materiel superiority! The English had put up little red flags in the captured trench, telling their artillery 'Don't shoot, we are here!' So, amazingly, the closer you got to the enemy, the safer you were from his artillery fire." Nonetheless, with available stockpiles almost exhausted, 11th Brigade's bomb supplies were only maintained by borrowing from the neighbouring 10th Brigade.[142]

The first German counter-attack, delivered against the left flank from the vicinity of the Ypres – Roulers railway cutting, was broken up by artillery fire at approximately 7:30 a.m. Prisoner statements gathered by 8:00 a.m. informed 1st Rifle Brigade's intelligence officer that there were "2 battalions opposite … the 215th in the fire trench, and 213th behind: They are LANDSTURM from SCHLESWIG – HOLSTEIN and have had about 4 months training." A second seemingly half-hearted counter-attack by "one party of 100 and several small parties … moving from Fortin 17" was dispersed by the artillery at 10:00 a.m.:

> The English were sitting as if in the jaws of pincers. But they put up a desperate defence and were supported in exemplary fashion by their artillery … The attack was snuffed out by an enemy barrage. Mutual exhaustion became apparent as the July sun shone down from a blue sky … onto both friend and enemy. A grenade duel was going on to the south between the English and 7/215, the English at first being driven back, but then recapturing lost ground … [143]

Hostile machine-gun and shellfire continued unabated as two platoons of 1st Somerset Light Infantry relieved a portion of 'C' Company at 11:00 a.m.[144] German shellfire, increasing in intensity at 1:00 p.m., was immediately followed by a "sharp revival" of bomb fighting on both flanks; two companies of the Hampshire Regiment,

141 Ibid.: 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915', TNA: WO95/1496: 1st Rifle Brigade War Diary and Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918*, p. 118. Earlier supplies having been withdrawn throughout the BEF due to design malfunctions, this was probably one of the first instances of Mills bomb distribution during active operations.

142 Tiessen, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 213*, p.258 and TNA: WO95/1442: 'WAR DIARY 6-7-15', 4th Division War Diary.

143 TNA: WO95/1489: 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915', 11th Brigade War Diary and Tiessen, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 213*, p. 259.

144 TNA: WO95/1496: 1st Rifle Brigade War Diary and Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914–1918*, p. 118.

who had been sent forward in support, were stood-to in case of emergency."[145] On the left, the French reported "the Germans were massing in communications trenches running east and west to the north of Farm 14; owing to the proximity of our troops, the French guns were unable to fire, but they shelled the communication trench running through C.7.a. [map reference]. The French infantry and machine-guns however opened fire on the assembly."[146] The ongoing German bombardment, reaching a fearsome crescendo at 3:30 p.m., forced a hasty evacuation to the canal bank from the former British frontline, whilst International Trench, engulfed in an accelerated succession of shell bursts, also received a fair share of projectiles. This heralded a third counter-attack against both flanks, "the enemy [on the left] endeavouring to work along the communication trench instead of advancing across the open." British artillery observers brought fire to bear on visible enemy ranks; 1st Rifle Brigade, supported at one beleaguered trench outpost by "2nd Lieutenant A. Gould of the Somerset Light Infantry who, with his platoon sergeant and some of his men went to help the First Battalion post of three bombers", resisted enemy efforts to roll up International Trench. The remainder of the Somerset platoon "worked feverishly at deepening and improving the trench."[147] Checked by ferocious British resistance, the mid-afternoon counter-attack was repulsed before fighting died down at 5:00 p.m., the only tangible German gain being the recapture of a section of trench in front of the pulverized *Südspitze*. "The enemy artillery shelled the recaptured trench with extreme severity, despite the fact that 5th and 6th Coys [*RIR 215*] were practically in touching distance of the enemy." Sunset occurred at 8:06 p.m.; close quarter bombing engagements raged on both flanks until 9:00 p.m.[148] Subsequent predominating quietude allowed time for the relief of 1st Rifle Brigade and 1st Somerset Light Infantry by 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers and 2 companies of 1st Royal Warwickshire Regiment; a specially sanctioned rum ration was also issued out at this time.[149] A situation report from Prowse arrived at 4th Division HQ at 11:00 p.m.:

> 11th Brigade reports situation to be as follows: We hold hostile sap along hedge toward FARM 14 with the exception of a corner which will be consolidated tonight. Thence along line of [Cinq Chemins Estaminet – Boesinghe] road to

145 TNA: WO95/1489: 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915', 11 Brigade War Diary, Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918*, pp. 118-19.
146 TNA: WO95/1442: 'WAR DIARY 6-7-15', 4th Division War Diary.
147 Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918,* p. 119 and TNA: WO95/1496: 1st Rifle Brigade War Diary.
148 Berkley, p. 119, Willers, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 215 Vol. 1,* pp. 283, 285 and TNA: WO157/401: 'CALENDAR July 1915', VI Corps Intelligence File.
149 1st East Lancashire Regiment remained in the frontline. See TNA: WO95/1442: 'WAR DIARY 6-7-15', 4th Division War Diary and Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes, Vol. 1*, p. 107.

> south edge of German position, and our covering parties are in front of road blocking trench. I intend to carry on our line along the road to Trench [F] 31 [on right] by placing knife rests and starting digging behind them. Communicating trenches to our old line on west are completed and International Sap [Trench] is already being completed through for communications.[150]

Across no man's land, the Germans were preparing another counter-attack under cover of darkness before cancellation and receipt of orders to "dig in where they are." New-Sap was "to be consolidated, if necessary close behind the original sap"; the gap into Canal-Sap was to be "closed off." New positions were also "dug level with the moated castle [Farm 14] and barbed wire obstacles erected."[151]

"We had an awful time": 7–10 July

The next three days (7–9 July) were a severe trial for 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers and 1st Royal Warwickshire. Carried out "amidst much confusion, though fortunately the enemy refrained from shelling", 1st Rifle Brigade had been relieved on a 450 yard front by 3:00 a.m. on 7 July. Bestowed parapets reversed and revetted with haphazard sandbag buttresses and a "certain amount of wire put out" by their predecessors, four companies – two each from 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers and 1st Royal Warwickshire – took possession of International Trench with a third company of the former in close support 50 yards to the rear.[152] The night remained "fairly quiet" except for a midnight bombing foray that drove a British post "out of the junction of the sap and the International Trench just west of Farm 14."[153] The lull continued until noon when German batteries recommenced the bombardment, a chance shell taking out the Lancashire Fusiliers' canal bank HQ with the loss of three officers, including CO Lieutenant-Colonel C.J. Griffin wounded, and a number of attached signallers and runners. Complete disaster was narrowly averted when a box of bombs, set alight by the shellfire, was tossed into the canal.[154] A fourth counter-attack against the right of International Trench was repulsed "and by 1–20 p.m. the enemy's offensive ceased."[155] Uninterrupted shelling continued until 3:00 p.m. when, in preparation for a fifth

150 TNA: WO95/1442: 'WAR DIARY 6-7-15', 4th Division War Diary.
151 Willers, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 215 Vol. 1*, p. 294.
152 TNA: WO95/1442: 'General Staff – WAR DIARY – 7th July 1915', 4th Division War Diary and Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes, Vol. 1*, p. 107. One company of 1st Hampshire with 2 Maxims were in close support east of the canal; 1st Rifle Brigade, 1st Somerset Light Infantry and 1/8th West Yorkshire were in reserve near Elverdinghe.
153 TNA: WO95/1489: 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915', 11 Brigade War Diary.
154 Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes, Vol. 1*, pp. 107-08. Griffin was replaced by Major Forster of 1st Royal Warwickshire Regiment.
155 TNA: WO95/1489: 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915', 11 Brigade War Diary.

counter-attack, intense shrapnel fire preceded repeated frontal assaults against the centre. "All the grenadiers of the RIFLE BRIGADE, SOMERSETS and HANTS, also the cyclists, were ordered back to their units."[156] At 3:14 p.m. the Lancashire Fusiliers "reported that the Germans had tried to attack their centre …" Encountering a furious and sustained resistance, they were thrown back time and time again "with the aid of the newly issued Mills Bomb in whose use no instruction had been given, so that as many casualties were caused by its faulty handling as by the enemy."[157] All attempts to recapture lost territory frustrated, a weary *leutnant* of *RIR 213* reported:

> The attack began as Jäger 18 went forward. It did not succeed. Jägers cut down. I attempted the same task with hand grenades. No success. The trench is absolutely destroyed. I will try one final time with 2 Coy. My men are completely shattered, 24 hours without sleep. I too. We are being fired at by 2 or 3 MGs as we advance.[158]

A sixth attack was ordered, but the "troops failed to advance … the reason being that all that remained were Landsturm and Ersatztruppen,[159] none of the older NCOs and men left, who were 'unnerved' by hours of fighting and heavy enemy artillery fire."[160] Despite indications that another German assault was in the offing, "it did not materialise though shelling continued intermittently throughout the evening and night – and the ghastly fight went on in the sap." Captured by the Germans around midnight on 7 July and recaptured soon afterwards, "it was finally evacuated, neither side being able to hold it."[161]

Communications remained intact for the first 36 hours commencing with the start of the British bombardment, the only interruption occurring when the main telegraph line was severed on the canal bank by shellfire. Signallers responded by running a provisional line in 20 minutes time; the main line was mended after nightfall. "From thence onwards until the Brigade was relieved the communications remained intact between the battalions and Brigade."[162] Medical arrangements, it was later observed, "worked excellently, the regimental stretcher bearers bringing the wounded down

156 Ibid.
157 Ibid., Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes, Vol. 1*, p. 108 and John Ashby, *Seek Glory, Now Keep Glory: The Story of the 1st Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment 1914-1918* (Solihull: Helion & Company, 2000), pp. 126-29.
158 Tiessen, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 213*, p. 264.
159 *Ersatztruppen*: Depot troops.
160 Tiessen, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 213*, p. 264.
161 TNA: WO95/1442: 'General Staff – WAR DIARY – 7th July 1915', 4th Division War Diary, Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes, Vol. 1*, p. 108 and TNA: WO95/1489: 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915', 11 Brigade War Diary.
162 "Alternative visual by Dietz disc and lamps was arranged, but was not found necessary. It would probably have been impractical owing to heavy shelling." See TNA: WO95/1489: 'COMMUNICATIONS', 11 Brigade War Diary.

to the canal bank to Bridge 6D where the bearer company took them over; evacuating serious cases down the communication trench to HULL'S FARM, more lightly wounded being directed to LODI farm. The motor ambulances also worked well and the dressing stations were clear of all wounded by 11 a.m. [on 6 July], 200 cases having passed through."[163]

The morning report for 8 July stated that "Trenches in the left section, especially those along the canal, shelled all night – at times heavily. Other sectors quiet. Wind – westerly."[164] Consolidation work continued under machine-gun and sniper fire. Bomb fights that reduced available British grenade stores to worrying levels occurred where both sides attempted to achieve local tactical advantage.[165] The seventh and eighth German counter-attacks, launched from the vicinity of Farm 14, were routed before noon:

> About 9–0 a.m. enemy were reported to be massing near Farm 14. About one hour later they were seen advancing to the right of the LANCS FUSILIERS, whilst reinforcements were seen doubling down the communication trench north and east of Farm 14. The enemy were driven back with heavy loss by the fire of our 9.2 [in.] and 18 pounder, but they then started another bombardment, and were again seen massing beyond FARM 14 about 10–45 a.m., but were prevented from attacking by our artillery fire.[166]

RIR 215's post-war history observed: "Hardly had the 3/215 men got into the meadow in front of the moated castle when they 'mown down by machine-gun fire'. Every attempt was nipped in the bud. The troops are absolutely exhausted."[167] The German bombardment resumed preparation for a ninth and, as far as 11th Brigade was concerned, final counter-attack that afternoon: "When the troops finally stormed forward they were met by such devastating fire from five machine-guns, that the companies, within seconds, were reduced to something that no longer resembled an attacking force." Their demoralised foe's confusion apparent, 11th Brigade exultantly reported "… enemy is trying to get his infantry to advance but they do not appear to like it." As for the overall situation and troop morale, the "Germans up to now have made nine-counter-attacks, all of which failed. All ranks reported to be very

163 TNA: WO95/1489: 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915', 11 Brigade War Diary.
164 TNA: WO95/1442: 'War Diary – 8th July 1915', 4th Division War Diary.
165 Ibid., Tiessen, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 213*, pp. 266-67 and Willers, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 215 Vol. 1*, pp. 292-93.
166 TNA: WO95/1489: 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915', 11 Brigade War Diary.
167 Willers, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 215 Vol. 1*, p. 293. Six counter-attacks were launched on 6 July; three on 7-8 July. See TNA: WO95/1489: 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915', 11 Brigade War Diary.

International Trench (line of raised earth running away from camera to the right) following capture. Sandbagged breastworks denoting the new British forward position trail off to the left. (Jon Cooksey)

cheery but done up."[168] Debilitated by fatigue and heavy casualties, 2 companies of 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers were relieved by 2 companies of 1st Hampshire Regiment after dark.[169]

By this time, 49th Division had begun the process of relieving 4th Division, 146th Brigade taking responsibility for 10th Brigade's sector by 1:45 a.m. on the 8th. So began the West Riding Territorials six months' long gethsemane – culminating in the first large-scale German phosgene gas attack on 19 December – in what was later dubbed "as nasty a piece of front as the British occupied in the summer of 1915."[170] Orders for the relief of 11th Brigade were issued, "and the Division was asked to arrange for buses to take the men back to their own billets."[171] During the interim, elements of 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers and 1st Hampshire Regiment carried on with

168 Willers, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 215 Vol. 1*, p. 293 and TNA: WO95/1442: 'War Diary – 8th July 1915', 4th Division War Diary.
169 TNA: WO95/1442: 'War Diary – 8th July 1915', 4th Division War Diary and Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes, Vol. 1*, p. 108.
170 TNA: WO95/1442: 'War Diary – 8th July 1915', 4th Division War Diary, Sir J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1916 Vol. I* (London: Macmillan, 1932), pp. 158-62, McGreal, *Boesinghe*, pp. 57-86 and Cooksey, *Flanders 1915*, p. 82.
171 TNA: WO95/1489: 'Narrative of Operations, 6–10 July 1915', 11 Brigade War Diary.

consolidation under artillery and trench mortar fire whilst remaining alert to further enemy attempts to reclaim International Trench. "'We had an awful time' one officer wrote 'my company was in the worst place in the whole line and they shelled us the whole time." Collapsing trench sections and flimsy parapets, "not bullet-proof", left defenders exposed to the inexorable bombardment.[172] The enemy, however, had had enough, *RIR 213's* regimental history subsequently observing: "After the usual dawn enemy artillery fire, the situation quietened down. A general weariness set in, affecting both us and our opponents." The Germans were indeed in a "pitiful state … the best officers and NCOs" missing. Reports that the canal had been drained resulted in a state of high alert and "artillery from 46 & 52 RD [Reserve Divisions] puts down a barrage on the enemy trenches."[173]

Its four-day ordeal at an end, 11th Brigade and attached units were relieved by 148th Brigade before dawn on 10 July.[174] Some 8,000 bombs were thrown during 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers' 48 hour defensive action.[175] Hailing from Barnsley, Rotherham and vicinity, the incoming 1/5th York & Lancaster Regiment companies were appalled by the shambolic state of International Trench and the inescapable evidence of carnage:

> I got into the trench and waited for daylight. As it grew lighter I stuck my periscope over the top of the trench and a terrible sight met my eyes – there were piles of dead in front, in the narrow strip of No Man's Land … the smell of decaying flesh was awful, and there were flies. The trenches we were occupying once belonged to the Germans and we had to pass through B Company to get to our sector and on the way you had to pass a certain dugout. Inside were three

172 Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes, Vol. 1*, p. 108 and Atkinson, *The Royal Hampshire Regiment Vol. 2 1914-1918*, p. 67. Captain J.F. Gwynne, 1st Hampshire's devoted medical officer, was killed whilst attending to a wounded Rifle Brigade man "who had been badly wounded three days earlier" and "was lying out in a half-dug trench." Captain John Fitzgerald Gwynne RAMC is buried in Talana Farm Cemetery. See Atkinson, p. 67.

173 Tiessen, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 213,* pp. 268, 292. On 7 July 12 Brigade reported that the "canal was falling steadily all day and the level was eight inches lower than at 9 a.m. this morning." 6th Division, in response to a query from 4th Division, "as to whether they know cause of fall of water in canal stated that nothing has happened their way to account for it. The water has been mysteriously falling for the last 3 or 4 days and is causing considerable difficulty in swinging bridges. It is now 4 feet below normal level." See TNA: WO95/1442: 'General Staff – WAR DIARY – 7th July 1915' and 'War Diary – 8th July 1915', 4th Division War Diary.

174 TNA: WO95/1489: 'RELIEF OF THE 11th BRIGADE BY THE 148th Brigade', 6 July 1915, 11 Brigade War Diary and WO 95/1442: 'War Diary – 10 July 1915', 4th Division War Diary. 12 Brigade was relieved by 147 Brigade during the evening of 8 July.

175 TNA: WO95/1442: 'War Diary – 8th July 1915', 4th Division War Diary and Stephen Bull, *World War I Trench Warfare (1)* (Oxford: Osprey, 2002), p. 46.

> dead Germans in sitting positions … and they had become horribly bloated. Eventually we shoved earth in on top of them to cover them up.[176]

The Battalion's diarist remarked:

> The trenches … were in a terrible state. Several of them had only recently been captured from the Germans and very little had been done to consolidate the position. A large number of dead were still unburied both our own [and] of the enemy and the conditions in which the officers and men had to live were terrible. The trenches and canal bank were strewn with rifles and equipment belonging to killed and wounded of units previously in occupation of the line and with ammunition, bombs and stores of every description. These were collected as far as possible and depots formed at different points. A number of men re-armed themselves with short MLE rifles and long bayonets in place of their CLLE rifles and short bayonets.[177]

Intense shellfire lasting from 3:00 to 10:00 p.m. on the 10th forced the South Yorkshire Territorials to redeploy companies and platoons as a desperate measure to avoid casualties. Subsequent activity convinced some distant observer to make what turned out to be a false report that International Trench had been lost during the late afternoon.[178] On the left flank, a German bombing attack was repelled by a single platoon supported by bombers. Finally conceding the position to the enemy, the Germans confined themselves to sporadic bombing, sniping and artillery bombardments thereafter.[179]

176 Cooksey, *Flanders 1915*, p. 98.

177 Ibid. Territorial battalions embarked for France in 1914-15 armed primarily with the obsolete long CLLE (Charger Loading Lee Enfield MKI*) rifle. Spare or castaway SMLE (Short Magazine Lee Enfield) rifles, standard issue to the Regular Army, were a much sought after replacement for the unwieldy CLLE.

178 The CO 1/5th York & Lancaster Regiment later observed: "During the afternoon about 3.0 p.m., I came to the conclusion from the number of casualties that had occurred that the forward line, especially in the centre, was too thickly held and decided to withdraw the company then in the centre and replace it by three platoons of the supporting company. At the same time also, the officer commanding the platoons in the forward trench on the PILKEM ROAD ordered his men to move back to the communicating trench to avoid the heavy shelling as much as possible. The result of this was a certain amount of movement further back and a report got circulated that the enemy had retaken our front trench. This was entirely wrong: none of the trenches held by us were vacated at all and the whole line remained intact during the time we were in occupation of it." See TNA: WO95/2806: 'Appendix IV', 13 July 1915, 1/5th York & Lancaster Regiment War Diary. The perceived retirement remained an accepted fact in at least one consulted post-war regimental history. See Wyrall, *The West Yorkshire Regiment in the War1914-1918 Vol. 1*, p. 99.

179 TNA: WO95/2806: 'Appendix IV', 13 July 1915, 1/5th York & Lancaster Regiment War Diary.

Accolades, Analysis & Aftermath

2nd Lieutenant F.C. Hitchcock, stationed to the south in 6th Division's sector, dismissively remarked in his diary: "The 4th Division carried out an attack which did not materialise into any great success. They advanced, taking 200 yards of enemy trench and a bag of 80 prisoners."[180] International Trench now in British hands, congratulatory telegrams from V Corps and Second Army were received by 4th Division on 6 July at 2:05 and 2:20 p.m. respectively; Wilson held off with his felicitations to 11th Brigade until evening.[181] Away from the frontline since the evening of 6 July, Sergeant Cook thankfully observed: "What a relief to get out of the line and be able to walk about upright, instead of crouching along like a thief in the night." Pleased with their apparent good fortune after the gruelling experience of Second Ypres and succeeding weeks of seemingly interminable trench warfare, units of 4th Division, now in Second Army reserve, settled into hut or tented encampments in the rear area. Over the course of following week, battalions of 11th Brigade paraded to hear laudatory personal addresses delivered by such notables as Keir, Plumer and Sir John French, the latter delivering a lengthy speech to the entire Brigade on 20 July.[182]

Effusive with praise, 4th Division's after-action report to VI Corps observed that the attack's success was "in great measure due to the artillery … The assault of the Rif. Brig. supported by the SOM. L.I. was extremely well carried out, but even more to be commended perhaps is the manner in which the battalions who held the captured trenches during the 6th, 7th and 8th maintained their ground under a most severe bombardment."[183] Previously expressed concerns about the perceived operational necessity were addressed in a succeeding paragraph that would give, it was no

180 Hitchcock, *Stand To!*, p. 45.

181 See TNA: WO95/1442: 'WAR DIARY 6-7-15', 4th Division War Diary.

182 Molesworth (ed), *A Soldier's War*, p. 42, Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918,* p.119, Atkinson, *The Royal Hampshire Regiment Vol. 2 1914-1918*, pp. 67-68, Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes, Vol. 1*, p. 108, Nicholson & MacMullen, *History of the East Lancashire Regiment in the Great War 1914-1918,* p. 51 and TNA: WO95/1489: 'The following congratulatory messages have been received respecting the operations of this Brigade from the 6th to the 10th instant', 12 July 1915 and 'Copy of Address by Field Marshal Sir John French Commander-in-Chief to 11th Infantry Brigade Tuesday 20/7/15', 11th Brigade War Diary. 4th Division was ordered south to join the newly-formed Third Army (sector extending 15 miles north from Curlu on the Somme to Hébuterne) shortly afterwards. 3rd Division staff officer William La T. Congreve observed on 14 July: "The forming of the Third Army is meaning the withdrawal of several Regular divisions from here. In fact all corps in the future are to be Regular/Territorial/New Army divisions, so the 5th and 4th divisions leave this part of the world …" See Norman (ed) *Armageddon Road*, p. 155.

183 TNA: WO95/1489: '4/Div. No. GGG. 316', 13 July 1915, 11 Brigade War Diary. Although bearing the signature of BGRA Brigadier-General R.F. Fox, temporary GOC 4th Division in Major-General Wilson's absence, the observations and sentiments expressed in this document were no doubt those of the latter.

doubt hoped, Second Army and VI Corps HQs pause before ordering further attacks against like objectives:

> The losses during the actual attack were very small, but as is usually the case in these small enterprises, heavy casualties have been suffered by the units who held the captured trenches afterwards. It is I think worth consideration whether such enterprises should be undertaken, unless to gain some very important tactical point which materially affects the remainder of the line, or unless a methodical progress from tactical point to tactical point is intended. If undertaken they must be well supported with artillery afterwards, and the consolidation of the captured position continued under cover of severe daily bombardments by our heavy guns and howitzers, otherwise the advantage gained will not compensate for the losses suffered by our infantry.[184]

The Rifle Brigade's post-war historian was equally praiseworthy of the operation's execution and consequent determined defence: "The officers and men who had been engaged were, as they had every reason to be, in high spirits over the achievement." Success was "chiefly ascribed to the excellence of the plans made by Colonel Seymour and Captain Downes and to the initiative of officers and men alike … But the gain of some seventy-five yards of ground on a frontage of three hundred yards", he sourly observed, had been made at the expense of 1st Rifle Brigade and 1st Somerset Light Infantry, not to mention 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers, 1st Royal Warwickshire, 1st Hampshire and 1st East Lancashire.[185] Combined losses for all five battalions from 6–10 July (eight officers and 317 other rank fatalities and 709 wounded) were 1,026 officers and men.[186]

German casualties, based on consulted regimental histories, are difficult to estimate with exactitude. *RIR 213's* narrative records nothing beyond the loss of four officers and approximately 80 men up to the early hours of 7 July, although casualties

184 Ibid.

185 Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918*, p. 119. Seymour was promoted and Downes awarded the DSO. Two MCs, 1 DCM and a mentioned in despatches were also presented/recorded to members of 1st Rifle Brigade for this action.

186 Infantry fatalities for the period 6–10 July were as follows: 1st Rifle Brigade (4 officers and 74 men); 1st Somerset Light Infantry (1 officer and 41 men); 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers (1 officer and 94 men); 1st Hampshire (2 officers and 39 men); 1st Royal Warwickshire (26 men) and 1st East Lancashire (43 men) or 325 total. Wounded per battalion: 1st Rifle Brigade (76); 1st Somerset Light Infantry (105); 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers ((302); 1st Hampshire (25); 1st East Lancashire (201) or 709 total. See *Soldiers Died in the Great War 1914-19* [CD Rom] (Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, 2011), Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918*, p. 119, Molesworth (ed), *A Soldier's War*, p. 42, Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Two Volumes, Vol. 1*, p. 107, Atkinson, *The Royal Hampshire Regiment Vol. 2 1914-1918*, p. 67 and Nicholson & MacMullen, *History of the East Lancashire Regiment in the Great War 1914-1918,* p. 51.

sustained during subsequent counter-attacks certainly added to the numbers of killed, wounded and missing. Conversely, *RIR 215's* narrative is more precise with documented casualty figures of 182 dead, 316 wounded and 19 POW during 6–14 July.[187] It is, however, fair to assume that British casualties were, as Wilson predicted, greater than those inflicted on the enemy. An initial haul of 21 prisoners was reported by 1st Rifle Brigade before 7:00 a.m. on the 6th; the final tally was 40 prisoners, five of which were wounded when taken captive. On examination they were found to be members of *213 RIR*, *215 RIR*, *46th Reserve Field Artillery Regiment*, *23rd Reserve Foot Artillery Regiment, 6th Pioneer Battalion* and *195th Minenwerfer Section*.[188] In addition to providing unit identifications and assigned localities, composition of personnel and organisational details, "prisoners agreed that there are no gas cylinders now in the trenches" and "that they were taken by surprise. They had only taken over the trench last night and they were all asleep, only one sentry having been posted." Interrogator impressions of this shaken and bedraggled assortment were largely negative: "The prisoners are said for the most part to be a poor lot, many are very young and others weakly."[189] Captured booty consisted of one "machine-gun complete", one broken machine-gun "left in trenches", three boxes of machine-gun ammunition, one oxygen cylinder, one electric detonator and two 91mm smoothbore *Lanz Minenwerfers* displaying bullet impact marks.[190] Captured letters provided insight into homefront sentiments and appeared to confirm "that in some cases men of the Landsturm have been called up between 36 and 38 years of age and others, up to 45 years of age." A pocketbook taken from a prisoner of *RIR 215* provided particulars of a previously unknown letter signal code that differed from "those laid down in the 'Handbook of the German Army'"[191]

Dissemination of lessons learnt was considered of paramount importance for future operations. 4th Division HQ produced a document based on the experience of the units involved. Divided into seven subsections, it included best practice

187 Tiessen, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 213,* pp. 262-63 and Willers, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 215 Vol. 1*, p. 299. Casualty figures for *18th Reserve Jäger Battalion* were unavailable.

188 TNA: WO95/1442: 'WAR DIARY 6-7-15' and 'Narrative of Operations 6–10 July 1915' and 'Summary of Information, VI Corps 8th July 1915', 4th Division War Diary.

189 See TNA: WO157/401: 'Summary of Information No. 34', 6 July 1915, 'Summary of Information VI Corps, 8th July 1915' and 'Summary of Information No. 36, 9 July 1915', VI Corps Intelligence File.

190 Berkley, *The History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918,* p. 118. The *Lanz* mortars were subsequently salvaged by 1/5th York & Lancaster Regiment. One was sent to the Second Army Trench Howitzer School at Berthen. Shipped back to Great Britain, the other became a prized Battalion trophy on display in the drill hall at Rotherham. See TNA: WO95/1442: 'War Diary – 9th July 1915', 4th Division War Diary and Cooksey, *Flanders 1915* pp. 128-29 for contemporary photographs.

191 TNA: WO95/1442: 'Summary of Information, VI Corps 8th July 1915' and 'Narrative of Operations 6–10 July 1915', 4th Division War Diary.

experience and credible remarks concerning the positioning of trench mortars, the need for large quantities of a standard issue bomb,[192] trench consolidation, machine-guns, ammunition supply, entrenching methods, and the value of shelter for supports and reserves. All these points were put on record for the prospective edification of superiors and subordinates. There were no new lessons concerning the artillery, the report concluded, "except as regards the great use of a gun right up in the frontline."[193]

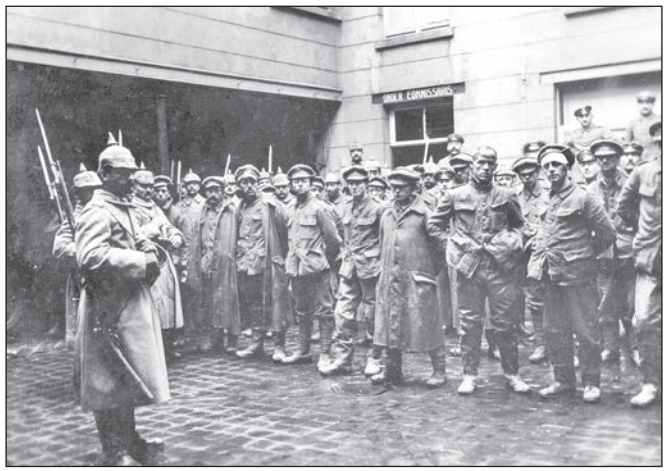
Apart from inflicting severe losses on a counter-attacking enemy, a modest bag of prisoners and the acquisition of war material and documents, what had the capture of International Trench achieved? Emphasis on methodical preparations and close cooperation of all arms ensured the objective was secured and subsequent German counter-attacks rebuffed in, given the circumstances, an unintentional but fortuitous shift to "bite and hold" attrition of enemy forces by default. Applied against a single trench line, this operational/tactical approach, a legacy of Neuve Chapelle, would almost always succeed. Insofar as the local tactical situation was improved, some depth was added to the east canal bank defences, but these remained under close observation from the dominating Pilckem heights. Shortages in men, guns and ammunition determined that the larger and more desirable objective of seizing the Pilckem Salient was, as Wilson had previously pointed out, beyond the capabilities of Second Army at this time. Time would reveal whether or not the lesser objective was worth the not inconsiderable effort.

Subsequent fighting at Hooge, Bellewaarde and environs in the summer and autumn of 1915 put paid to any major offensive activity in the north. Incorporated into the locally designated 'F' series of trenches comprising the frontline, the sobriquet "International Trench" passed into obscurity, rotating garrisons knowing little if anything of F33 and F34's contentious past. And so it remained until February 1916, when the position was lost as a consequence of a local German spoiling attack designed to draw Allied attention away from the impending general offensive at Verdun. Strong patrols dispatched to the "now abandoned English position" by *240 RIR* (*52nd Reserve Division*) on 29 February discovered "a shell-pocked wasteland in the area SE of the moated castle. From the dilapidated trenches comes the repulsive stench of decay."[194]

192 "It is most essential to reduce the number and kinds of grenades used … An almost unlimited supply [of bombs] is required if trenches are to be retained … The 'Mills' is unsuitable for assaulting purposes because, if a man is wounded while carrying it and releases his grip, the spring jumps up and starts the mechanism which explodes the grenade in 5 seconds. The 'Hale' [sic] is not so likely to go off. The 'Mills' is suitable for use after the trench has been gained and is better for throwing from a trench than the 'Hale.'"

193 TNA: WO96/1442: 'NOTES ON LESSONS LEARNT', 4th Division War Diary.

194 See Captain V.E. Inglefield, *The History of the Twentieth (Light) Division* (London: Nisbet, 1921) pp. 36-43 and Willers, *Königlich Preußisches Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 215 Vol. 1*, p. 295.



February 1916: Forlorn British Tommies of 20th (Light) Division taken captive during fighting for the 'F' series of trenches encompassing International Trench and vicinity. *52nd RD* staff officer Rudolph Binding (*A Fatalist at War*, 1929, p. 92) was unimpressed by these tangible representatives of the New Army: "Crooked legs, rickety, alcoholic, degenerate, ill-bred, and poor to the last degree. If these are 'Kitchener's', one can understand the effort to get other elements than this venal rubbish into the army by forced recruiting, otherwise conscription." (Author's collection)

In his ninth despatch, Sir John French tellingly observed that the capture of International Trench, although of "minor importance in itself", was a prime "example of the daily difficulties which officers and men in the trenches are constantly called upon to overcome, and of the spirit of initiative and resource which is so marked a feature amongst them."[195] Overshadowed by larger events, the "small but successful operation" quickly faded from public memory as assuredly as the appellation "International Trench" vanished from British maps and documents.[196] Overrun on the opening day of the Third Ypres offensive (31 July 1917), International Trench, Fortin 17, Farm 14 and vicinity retained the buried secrets of 6–10 July 1915, amongst others, until the summer and autumn of 1999 when the Diggers' earnest archaeological exertions revealed the first tangible traces of the long forgotten action. In addition to the careful exhumation of 13 unidentified Rifle Brigade, Lancashire Fusilier and York & Lancaster Regiment skeletons, a leaning stack of rusted service rifles still affixed with "Quillon" 1907 pattern bayonets, varieties of British and German pattern bombs, faded fragments of khaki and *Feldgrau*, verdigris-coated regimental cap badges,

195 Sir John French, *The Despatches of Lord French* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1917), pp. 392-93.
196 McGreal, *Boesinghe*, p. 48.

buttons and shoulder titles along with hundreds of other personal effects were also unearthed. Perhaps the most poignant find, perfectly preserved by the Flanders loam, was an ornate fabric and lace religious scapular perchance carried into battle as a good luck talisman.[197] "Time, which antiquates antiquities, and hath an art to make dust of all things, has yet spared these minor monuments."[198]

197 See Activities of the Diggers – SUMMER AND AUTUMN 1999 <http://www.mausershooters.org/diggers/E/activiteiten/1999-rijkeoogst/welkom.htm> The author had the good fortune to visit the site of International Trench as a guest of Diggers team member Aurel Sercu in summer 2003. Fenced in and temporarily filled with earth as a deterrent to relic scavengers, an overlooked human bone was still discernible on the surface. Gathered up by our host, it was duly deposited in a nearby sack full of similar fragments of unknown mortality.

198 Browne, *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial,* Chapter V.

13

"A great victory all but gained": The Battle of Loos, 1915

Brian Curragh

On the 16 November 1915, the House of Lords debated the role and performance of "the Headquarters Staff at the Front". Unsurprisingly, the recently concluded Battle of Loos was discussed – Lord Sydenham, a former Royal Engineer and a graduate of the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, spoke of "the great attack in the region of Loos in September [where] a great victory was all but gained." He continued: "There must be some reason why that victory was not won. Some reason must be assigned. Most undoubtedly it was not want of gallantry on the part of our troops." Sydenham highlighted the role of "faulty Staff arrangements" when it came to "the bringing up of the reserves at the proper time" and also that "two divisions of troops which had never been under fire and knew nothing of trenches were hurried up and flung tired and hungry, after a long march, into the fiery furnace of this great attack. Why was that?"[1]

Sydenham was one of many who pointed the finger of blame at Field Marshal Sir John French, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force [BEF]. Criticism centred on French's control and questionably late release of untrained and inexperienced reserve forces, with this being a major contributor to the battle's failure. This oversimplifies the result at Loos and does not accurately reflect the BEF's performance. Errors in judgement and planning were certainly made, but there are achievements within the battle that illustrate that the BEF was developing from the small Regular Army of 1914 to the more complex force that would take to the field on the Somme in 1916. This chapter will examine how the battle was planned and how these plans lead to the first day's achievements. It will focus in particular on 7th Division and 9th (Scottish) Division. While the 7th Division was a Regular division that had been in action since October 1914, 9th Division was the first of Kitchener's New

1 House of Lords debate, 16 November 1915, Hansard 1803-2005 Archives http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1915/nov/16/the-headquarters-staff-at-the-front#S5LV0020P0_19151116_HOL_106 accessed 1 November 2014.

Army divisions to arrive on the Western Front (9 May 1915) and the first, at Loos, to see action. The two divisions were to fight alongside each other as part of I Corps.

Loos had been, until recently, one of the forgotten battles of the Great War, marooned between the BEF's arrival in 1914 and the attritional campaign of 1916. The battle was significant in a number of ways: it was the largest British land battle fought to date; the first (and only) battle where the British used cylinder-released gas at the beginning of an offensive and, perhaps most significantly, the first battle where the New Army divisions went into action. The battle, however, did not deliver the over-optimistic results it had promised – pinching-off a large salient in the German frontline and potentially collapsing the enemy position on the Western Front. David Lloyd George was to refer to the offensive as "futile carnage" but this simplistic, disparaging view of the engagement does not do justice to the intentions of the British High Command or the performance of the troops involved.[2] The action was required by coalition obligations imposed on Britain by her French allies. France faced three intractable problems: her manpower situation was worsening, her Russian ally – of whom so much had been hoped of before the war – was in disarray, and Germany showed no signs of weakening or losing her grip on the occupied territories of France and Belgium. The peaking of French resources in 1915, combined with the offensive beliefs of Joseph Joffre and Ferdinand Foch, were to overcome the defensive preferences of French President Raymond Poincaré. The Allied plan consisted of two simultaneous attacks on the German front line – a main French attack from the Champagne region towards Maubeuge and a second attack by the combined forces of the French Tenth Army and the BEF towards Valenciennes with the intention that the advances would meet at Maubeuge and thereby cut-off a large salient in the region Rheims, Royon and Arras.

The British element of the attack was to see a mixture of Regular and New Army divisions being sent against a well planned, albeit sparsely occupied, German defensive position. As so often in 1915, the attackers had insufficient artillery, lacking both guns and ammunition. This artillery shortfall was to be compensated for by an over-reliance on the uncontrollable abilities of chlorine gas to subdue the German defenders – regrettably the weather did not cooperate. Nevertheless, some success was achieved on the opening day of the attack, but a disagreement between Sir John French and General Sir Douglas Haig, commanding First Army, over the positioning, release and control of the reserve forces prevented exploitation. Much of the early gains were subsequently lost in the three bitter weeks of fighting that followed, before the battle officially came to an end in October.

Loos had been neglected historiographically since the publication of the Official History [OH] in 1928. Philip Warner's *The Battle of Loos* in 1975 was the only volume to examine at the battle until three studies were published in 2005 and 2006. First was Niall Cherry's *Most Unfavourable Ground: The Battle of Loos, 1915*,

2 David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, (2 vols. London: Odhams Press, 1938), I, p.290.

which presented a detailed narrative of the engagement. Major Gordon Corrigan's *Loos 1915: The Unwanted Battle* broadly sided with Haig with regard to the release of reserves, viewing John French's failure to deploy them in a timely manner as proof that he was not fit for the demands of modern warfare. The final volume was Nick Lloyd's *Loos 1915*, principally based on his 2004 doctoral thesis, which concentrates on the mechanics of command and the operational and tactical issues of the battle. He observed that the squabble between French and Haig over the reserves "helped to mask some of the more fundamental problems of the Loos attack, so riven was it with contradiction."[3]

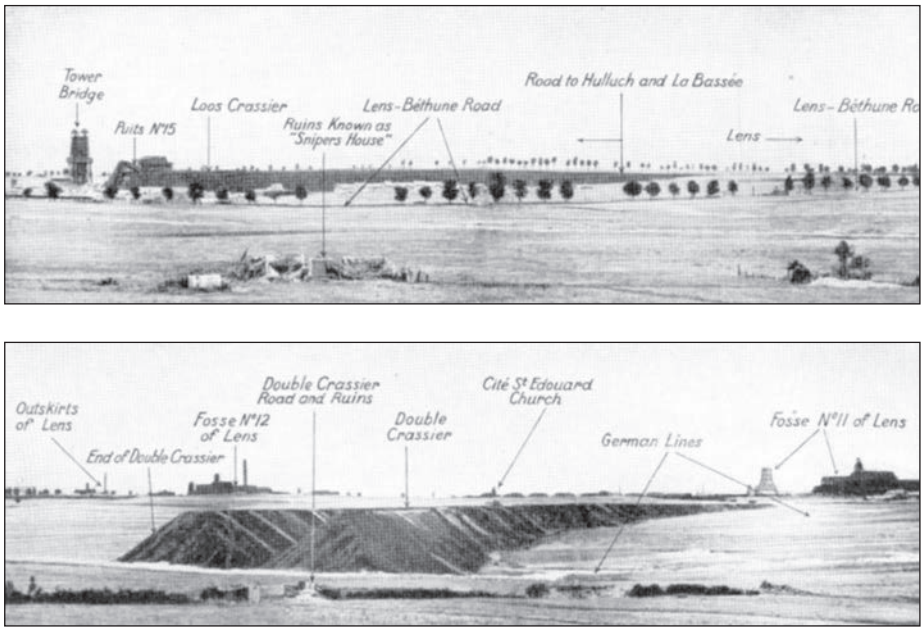
Background to the Battle

As Britain approached the summer of 1915, the coalition was divided. Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, well aware that the New Armies would not be ready for the field until 1916, pushed for an active defence for the remainder of 1915 following the poor results at Neuve Chapelle, Aubers Ridge, and Festubert, not to mention the failure of the initial Gallipoli offensive. However, conferences in July were to change his plans. On 6 July, Kitchener attended a conference in Calais where he pushed for an attritional, defensive campaign on the Western Front combined with a renewed effort at Gallipoli. The following day, this was reversed at an International Military Conference at Chantilly where Joffre and French argued successfully for a powerful attack on the Western Front. Lloyd argues that this apparent switch in focus was Kitchener buying French support for the Suvla Bay offensive, but by this time the Gallipoli operation was deadlocked and plans were accelerating on the Western Front. The British and French commands had met in June with Sir John and Foch agreeing to attack "on the broadest front" – for Foch this meant a ten division British attack to the left of his Tenth Army. However, Haig's initial assessment of the battlefield struck a note of caution. The mining communities to the north of Arras and Lens presented difficult terrain for any attack, and their defensive strength was amplified by well sited German positions and superior weight of artillery. Haig's assessment of the number of troops and guns required for the attack to succeed suggested that the resources required for the battle would not be available until spring 1916. French was dubious and saw success as "improbable", but Joffre felt that "no more favourable ground … can be found."[4]

When Haig discussed the proposal with Lieutenant-General Sir William Robertson, he was still of the opinion that "the merits of an attack south of the Canal,

3 Sir J.E. Edmonds (comp), *Military Operations, France and Belgium 1915 Vol. II, Battles of Aubers Ridge, Festubert, and Loos* (London: Macmillan, 1928); Niall Cherry, *Most Unfavourable Ground* (Solihull: Helion & Company, 2005), Gordon Corrigan, *Loos 1915: The Unwanted Battle* (Stroud: Spellmount Publishers, October 2006) and Nick Lloyd, *Loos 1915* (Stroud: The History Press, 15 November 2006) p.230.

4 Imperial War Museum: Wilson papers, HHW 2/79/33, Joffre to French, 5 August 1915.



Panoramas of the Loos battlefield prior to the offensive. (Paul Reed)

viz. that that front is not favourable for attack, but if it is necessary for some reason to attack on that part of our front, then my previous proposals held good."[5] These proposals were set out in principle to Lord Haldane – who had enquired of Haig as to "how to win the war". Haig responded that it would be "by applying the old principles to the present conditions. Engage the enemy on a wide front, the wider the better, 100 miles or more, then, after five or six days, bring up a strong Reserve of all arms, attack by surprise and break through where the enemy had shown that he was weak!"[6] This desire for a wide frontage proved unrealistic at Loos, where the BEF was eventually to attack over a front that was less than four miles wide.

By 7 August, the details of the battle were becoming clearer. French, Robertson and Haig attended a conference at St. Omer where Joffre stated his desire for "the British Army to attack between the Canal to La Bassee" and our right, which is opposite Loos, with the object of taking Hill 70 and the ridge to the north of it near Hulluch." Despite deep reservations, French complied and asked Haig "to work out proposals for giving effect to the decision", but Haig noted that "my attack is to be made chiefly with artillery, and I am not to launch a large force of infantry to the

5 The National Archives (TNA): WO 256/5, Haig Diary, 22 July 1915.
6 Ibid., 30 July 1915.

attack of objectives which are so strongly held as to be liable to result only in the sacrifice of many lives."[7] This plan to pin the Germans in place while the French attacked to the south was rejected as on 12 August, Joffre repeated his need for "a large and powerful attack composed of the maximum force you have available, executed with the hope of success and carried through to the end. You are aware of the importance of the effect which the French Army is preparing."[8]

The following day Haig met with Lieutenant-General Hubert Gough, commanding I Corps, and Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Rawlinson, commanding IV Corps, and asked both for detailed proposals. To the south, Rawlinson was to capture Loos and then Hill 70 while Gough was tasked with the capture of the Hohenzollern Redoubt and the village of Hulluch. The operational assumption remained that the BEF's involvement would primarily be based on artillery, with an advance to take place "as soon as an opportunity for doing so is afforded … The employment of asphyxiating gas in connection with these attacks is also to be considered."[9] Plans were to be ready by the first week of September as Haig did not feel – "from my experience" – that the French would be ready before 15 September. First Army's planning continued despite Henry Wilson's advice "that if he [Sir John French] really disapproved of the attack south of the Canal, he should definitely say so at once, in order that some other plan might be arranged".[10]

Kitchener met again with the French between 16 and 19 August and finally guaranteed the BEF's role in the offensive, with this being approved by the Dardanelles Committee on 20 August. With the Eastern Front collapsing, "a [manufactured] myth of French war-weariness" and the end of the failed Suvla offensive at Gallipoli, Kitchener observed that Britain had to "make war as we must, and not as we should like" thereby marking the transition from the initial optimism of the early years towards the attritional struggle that had to be endured before the victories of 1918 were possible.[11]

In mid-August, Haig lunched with Sir John French who was in good form; he advised Haig not to discuss the proposed operation with Kitchener as "If Lord K were to know, he would tell the others in the Cabinet, and then all London would know! And the Germans would also get to hear of the proposed attack." Haig warned that any results would only come at the cost of "big losses".[12] When Haig met Kitchener in a private meeting two days later, he was warned that "he [Kitchener] had decided that we must act with all our energy and do our utmost to help the French, even though,

7 Ibid., 7 August 1915.
8 Ibid., Joffre letter to French, 12 August 1915.
9 Ibid., 13 August 1915.
10 This statement provides a rare example of Wilson not supporting French desires.
11 Kitchener to French, 20 August 1915, cited in Lloyd, *Loos*, p.45; with hindsight by the time that the Battle of Loos actually took place in late September, Russia had already recovered thereby removing a large part of the *raison d'être* for the battle.
12 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 17 August 1915.

by so doing, we suffered very heavy losses indeed." The Dardanelles "affair" was to be brought to a conclusion with the Western Front confirmed as "the decisive point".[13]

Six weeks after rejecting the prospect of a battle at Loos, Haig held his initial pre-battle planning conference at the Chateau d'Hinges on Monday 6 September. The attack was to be carried out by Gough's I Corps and Rawlinson's IV Corps, and potentially involve all six divisions. The two corps commanders had differing approaches. Gough wanted gas to follow a preliminary artillery bombardment with divisions then rushing the German lines. His scheme was to use the 9th Division during the day to take the Hohenzollern Redoubt with the right hand brigade taking on Fosse 8, the Corons de Maroc and Pekin Trench while the left brigade moved down the Vermelles railway line. The 7th Division would then assault at night to seize the Quarries and the village of Cite St. Elie. By contrast, Rawlinson favoured a longer timetable. After a period of heavy bombardment, saps were to be pushed forward to reduce the width of No Man's Land over the following week, with attacks then concentrating on biting off and holding small sections of the German line. He planned to use the 15th Division to take Loos over the course of the week, with 47th Division then moving south of the town to take the Double Crassier and Puits 16. It was to be Gough's shorter timescale that received Haig's approval.

Poor communications and a misunderstanding of Sir John French's intentions then lead Haig to allow the attack to take the form it ultimately did. French had instructed Haig to use the "full extent of your available resources" but that was not to prevent him from "developing [his] attack deliberately and progressively".[14] Unfortunately, soon after French was struck down by an illness leaving a command vacuum in the planning process. Without firm guidance, Haig interpreted his instructions as requiring an all-out infantry attack. Following the principles instilled into him at Staff College, he planned for a decisive battle incorporating the four themes of secrecy, rapidity, initiative and a vigorous pursuit of the enemy – somewhat different from his original desire for a limited subsidiary operation on very unfavourable terrain.

With the existence of a second heavily-fortified defensive system a few miles to the rear of the German frontline – out of range for the British artillery – the plan for the attack assumed a successful and quick capture of the frontline and a rapid advance on the sparsely-defended second position. Having rushed the second line, British forces were then to press on to the Haute Deule canal "without a pause". Within I Corps, 2nd Division on the left were to capture Auchy village and then form a defensive flank to shield 9th & 7th Divisions as they carried out the main assault. In the event of 2nd Division failing in this objective, a fall-back plan envisaged 9th Division forming a defensive flank thereby protecting 7th Division on the right of the corps' frontage.

With inadequate numbers of heavy guns and insufficient quantities of ammunition – Major-General R.C.B. Haking, commanding 1st Division, in his original plan to take

13 Ibid., 19 August 1915.
14 Ibid., 23 August 1915.

the Hohenzollern Redoubt had required one hundred rounds for each 18 Pounder and seventy-five rounds for each of the heavy pieces – Haig's plans were almost completely reliant on the successful use of gas. Gough described the weapon as "a boomerang ally – a tremendous but treacherous friend."[15] Haig had the use of "asphyxiating gas" suggested to him at a meeting on 7 July 1915 by Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Foulkes, the Royal Engineers officer designated to lead the development of the weapon. Haig, not the technophobe of popular imagination, expressed interest but felt the BEF had "better wait until we can use it on a large scale, because the element of surprise is always greater on the first occasion."[16] Gas was next discussed two weeks later when Haig met Robertson. Haig felt that although "the enemy's position in my front is very strong all the way along … By using gas it seems possible to make sure of gaining this position in spite of the greatly improved defences which the enemy has erected on it." Haig confirmed these views to Robertson two days later with the rather plaintive note that "I hope 'gas' will be available."[17] A month later, Haig told Foulkes: "we should want enough for a front of 6,300 yards by the 15 September. He said that he could provide that amount and would be able to let us have a good deal more by the date I mentioned."[18] On Sunday 22 August, Haig "motored" after Church Parade to St. Omer where he, together with his four Corps commanders, witnessed Foulkes' demonstration of chlorine gas and was sufficiently impressed to draw one of the cylinders in his diary that evening. The display of smoke was less successful but Haig commissioned the production of some smoke-producing bombs "for the purposes of covering the flanks of an attack from the enemy's machine-guns".[19]

Disappointing news was received four days later when Foulkes reported that only half of the gas previously promised would be available by 4 September due to manufacturing shortfalls in England. Haig was now faced with the choice of either delaying the attack to allow the quantities of gas to reach the levels promised or to use the reduced supplies on a curtailed version of the plan. Haig knew that the Germans had oxygen inhalers that would provide protection for thirty minutes – so the release of the reduced quantities of gas would now need to be prolonged beyond this period with this extension coming from intermittent discharges of smoke between the releases of gas.[20] Foulkes improved his forecast two days later as he now expected to have 5,100 cylinders by 6 September and possibly 6,500 by the 11 September.[21] Arrangements to house the cylinders required the digging of special emplacements every twenty-five yards, each of which were designed to hold fifteen cylinders – the emplacements were to be dug into the firing step with a level such that the tops of the cylinders were 4'6"

15 Sir Hubert Gough, *The Fifth Army* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1931), p.101.
16 TNA: WO256/4, Haig Diary, 7 July 1915.
17 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 21 and 23 July 1915.
18 Ibid., 21 August 1915.
19 Ibid., 22 August 1915.
20 Ibid., 26 August 1915.
21 Ibid., 28 August 1915.

below the parapet. Each cylinder, which weighed 150 pounds, had to be manhandled into its location by a party of three men. In total, the BEF needed 4,000 men to bring the 1,200 cylinders that were to be placed in the 9th Division's line. Another practical difficulty was that the gas had a tendency to corrode the screws on the cylinders making the actual release somewhat fraught. On 30 August, I Corps divisions received detailed instructions for the use of gas from Brigadier-General A.S. Cobbe VC, General Staff, I Corps. On fronts where attacks were planned, the forty minute discharge required to exceed the thirty minute cover of the German protective system would start with a ten minute gas discharge followed by alternating discharges of smoke and gas of four, six and six minutes before a final fourteen minute release of gas reached the forty minute mark. To ensure continuity across the front, those sections where attacks were not planned would release only six minutes of gas before using smoke to complete the remainder of the forty-minute "gas" attack.[22]

At this point it is necessary to consider the nature of the commanders of the two divisions of I Corps that would make the initial assault. 7th Division, a Regular formation initially assembled from garrisons stationed around the Empire, had been under the command of Thompson Capper since September 1914, apart from a four month gap in 1915 when Gough took command after Capper had been injured at a demonstration of some improvised bombs. Capper was born on 20 October 1863, in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India, the third son of William Copeland Capper, a Bengal Civil Servant who had fought alongside British and Indian soldiers in the town's defence in 1857. Thompson and his elder brother John were both sent back to England for their education – to the Imperial Service College, Haileybury and Wellington College respectively. Both brothers went on to enrol in the Royal Military Academies – Thompson at Sandhurst and John at Woolwich – and while John followed a career within the Royal Engineers, being involved in both the development of the airship and the tank, Thompson was commissioned into the East Lancashire Regiment in 1882.[23] After a decade of home service, Capper attended Staff College and was then posted to India where he saw active service as part of the Chitral Relief Force. He experienced further active service in Kitchener's campaign in the Mahdist War before involvement in the Second Boer War where he was part of the forces at Spion Kop and the relief of Ladysmith, being awarded the DSO and mentioned in despatches six times. Capper then spent nine years teaching at the Staff Colleges in Camberley and Quetta, India before returning home to be given command of 13th Infantry Brigade in Ireland. His next posting as Inspector of Infantry in February 1914 lasted only until

22 TNA: WO95/1733/2, I Corps order no.494 (G)15.

23 Two of Capper's other brothers also enrolled in the military, both reaching the rank of Colonel.

the outbreak of war when he was given command of 7th Division. Capper's career to date had left him with a resolute belief in the power of the offensive.[24]

In August 1915, 9th Division, a New Army division formed under the Scottish Command, was under the control of Major-General H.J.S. Landon when it was tasked with the capture of the enemy's frontline from the Vermelles-La Bassee railway to the Hohenzollern Redoubt together with the mining area of Fosse 8 and its surrounding *corons*.[25] Landon set out to his brigade commanders the three levels of assault that might be required of the division: "the big attack", "the little attack on the nose of Hohenzollern" or possibly no attack at all with no decision anticipated before midnight on the day prior and returned his proposals for a two brigade attack back to I Corps on 28 August.[26] The following day when Gough met with Haig, it was Landon himself, as opposed to his proposals, who was the main topic of conversation. Landon was currently "in bed with lumbago" and Gough expressed growing doubts with regard to his performance, specifically his lack of decisiveness combined with insufficient thoroughness when planning. Haig's advice was to get a medical opinion on his likely return and to postpone any decision until then. Coincidently, Sir John French was also unwell having come down with a "chill"; this was especially unfortunate as the attack was now seventeen days away. The delay, due to French forces not being ready until 15 September, was to have been discussed at the next meeting between Sir John French and Joffre – arranged for 31 August – but Sir John remained unwell, missing that and a meeting on the next day with Robertson. Gough reported back to Haig that Landon "was still far from well … and quite unable to go to the trenches or carry out a reconnaissance" and recommended that Landon be replaced without further delay. Haig agreed and passed the request to Robertson. The following day the Military Secretary appointed Major-General George Thesiger as his replacement.[27]

George Handcock Thesiger was born on 6 October 1868 in Barton, Lancashire, the eldest son of Lieutenant-General Charles Wemyss Thesiger and the grandson of Frederic Thesiger, 1st Baron Chelmsford, a Conservative politician who had twice held the position of Lord Chancellor. Thesiger came from a family with a strong heritage of military service. His uncle, General Frederic Thesiger, 2nd Baron Chelmsford, had the somewhat dubious record of having lead the British forces at Isandlwana, where "the British Army suffered its worst ever defeat at the hands of a technologically inferior indigenous force" while an earlier relation had fought alongside Nelson

24 For a more detailed biography of Capper, see Richard Olsen, 'An Inspirational Warrior: Major-General Sir Thompson Capper', in Spencer Jones (ed.) *Stemming The Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914* (Solihull: Helion & Company, 2013), pp. 189-208.

25 A *coron* was a company owned worker neighbourhood. *Corons* were made up of small brick cottages, outbuildings and allotments.

26 TNA: WO95/1726/1, Holland to 26th Infantry Brigade, 24 August 1915.

27 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 29 August–3 September 1915.

as his aide de camp at the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801.[28] Following schooling at Eton, Thesiger attended the Royal Military College, Sandhurst before being gazetted into the Rifle Brigade and seeing service under Kitchener on his Nile expedition. Thesiger was wounded at the Siege of Ladysmith during the Second Boer War, where he was also mentioned in despatches. After a period of recuperation, he attended Staff College before seeing further service in Ireland. At the outbreak of war, Thesiger was with the 4th Battalion of the Rifle Brigade in India and did not return to Europe until December. He then spent two short periods of active service in command of 2nd Infantry Brigade and then, on promotion, 33rd Infantry Division before being given the command of 9th Division on 8 September 1915. Haig, according to his diary, was not to meet Thesiger until 14 September when he visited 9th Division's HQ at Chateau des Pres: "I impressed on him the principle that men must go forward as fast and as far as possible once the attack was launched!"

Whether Thesiger, faced with taking on Landon's plans two weeks before the BEF's biggest offensive to date, appreciated this advice can only be surmised.[29]

Aims, Planning & Preparation

On 26 August, I Corps set out Capper's responsibilities. Assuming that 9th Division had cleared the trenches in front of them, 7th Division was to secure the position and then to advance against the Quarries and Cite St. Elie. Plans were to be submitted that were to consist of an overall scheme including the frontages assigned to each brigade; dispositions of battalions in attack and reserve; location of brigade & divisional command posts and how the trench mortars and machine guns were to be employed.[30] On 27 August, Haig's diary noted:

> In the afternoon I rode to Locon and saw Major-General Capper commanding 7th Division. He was working out a plan of attack for the 12 September. The ground being open, he was uncertain how to dispose of his Div'n. Six lines of trenches had been dug and he proposed to have two brigades in front line and to run the risk of loss by shellfire. The trenches would be deep. The alternative was to be less concentrated then, owing to the long communication trenches (1,500 yards) it would be impossible to reinforce and support the leading troops if successful. I told him he was to be given the command of a corps at an early date.[31]

28 Tony Pollard, "The Mountain is their Monument: An Archaeological Approach to the Landscape of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879", in Peter Doyle & Matthew R Bennett (ed.), *Fields of Battle: Terrain in Military History* (New York: Springer, 2002), pp.117-136.
29 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 14 September 1915.
30 TNA: WO95/591, I Corps order no. 494(G) 5, 26 August 1915.
31 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 27 August 1915.

At this stage the overall British plan was flexible and Capper was required to consider a range of scenarios. His proposal to I Corps lead with the observation that "the following proposals are made on the assumption that the IV Corps immediately to the south of the 7th Division are undertaking no offensive action." Apart from aiding 9th Division by establishing two batteries of machine-guns at the northern end of Curly Crescent to provide some high angle fire onto the western and southern sides of the Hohenzollern Redoubt, Capper had to prepare his own assault in such a way that it could react to the degree of success achieved by the 9th Division to the north. In the optimistic event that 9th Division's attack "so thoroughly disorganises the enemy that a more or less general retirement takes place", infantry scouts were to be pushed forward and as soon as they had reported the enemy's trenches to be clear, 7th Division were to advance with all artillery fire being directed onto the German line at the Quarries. Should the 9th Division meet sufficient resistance that they only moved forward slowly, 7th Division's advance would be "more difficult and must depend largely on the initiative of the local commanders. This advance will of necessity probably be made in echelon from the left, each battalion advancing when its front is cleared." This would require a heavy bombardment of the enemy frontlines before moving to the Quarries and subsequently onto the Cite St. Elie – Hulluch line. In the worst scenario, that 9th Division were only able to take the Hohenzollern Redoubt, "this case will require a stereotyped night assault" with the assault having taken the first two lines of enemy trenches only then resuming "at earliest light". The required artillery bombardment in this case would be on the front lines with occasional false-lifts so that the real time of the attack was not given away. Capper summed up the problem facing him as follows: "the uncertainty in the development of the situation necessitates the adoption of a formation which will suit every possible eventuality."[32] Capper reviewed his plans with Haig on 2 September who noted that "his preparations are progressing well and he is fully satisfied that everything will be ready in time."[33] The following day, 7th Division took over the front from which it was to attack.[34] When Haig and Capper next met ten days later, in the knowledge that the attack would take place irrespective of the weather conditions thereby potentially neutralising the effects of gas, Capper was against his division attacking unless "Fosse 8 and the Hohenzollern Redoubt has been taken … [Capper] has made most careful arrangements for the attack by his Division with the aid of gas and it will be most unfortunate if we cannot take advantage of them. C. is most confident of success this time."[35]

Capper was one of the Army's 'thinkers' but was equally clear in his views that decisive success in battle could only be gained by a vigorous offensive and above

32 TNA: WO95/1733/2, Capper to I Corps, 31 August 1915.
33 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 2 September 1915.
34 TNA: WO95/591, I Corps operation order no.104, 29 August 1915.
35 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 17 September 1915.

all by a "firmer determination in all ranks to conquer at any cost".[36] His note to his commanders of 18 September set out this resolve. Noting that Loos was to be a large scale operation, Capper stated: "it is not a question of capturing this or that locality or a few trenches. The intention is to break down the enemy's defensive system, and shake free from the present indecisive trench warfare." He anticipated that the use of "accessories" would "affect the enemy's morale, and simplify our task" and, with the defender's confidence shaken, "the bold action of even a small force yields results out of all proportions to its numbers." Warming to his theme, he continued: "we must abandon all narrow or limited ideas, and keep our eyes fixed on the large object in view … boldness and celerity are to be the keywords of our action: we do not want to "hurroosh" forward, but to advance rapidly and in good order." Counter-attacks were "to be met by offensive action, and not merely passively resisted." Capper concluded this rousing note with the instruction that "all ranks are to remember that the two unforgivable sins in battle are:

1. Waiting for orders when the situation clearly demands action.
2. Failing to support a comrade who evidently needs assistance."[37]

On 19 August Landon had held a conference of 9th Division's brigadiers to impress "upon them the importance of their making full use of the rest period in order to train their commands in issuing from a line of trenches to assault an enemy in an entrenched position." To this end, all brigades were instructed to create a two-trench practice area to allow them to rehearse for the coming offensive.[38] On 22 August, Cobbe set out 9th Division's responsibilities. It was to take the enemy frontline south of the Vermelles/La Bassee railway and capture the Hohenzollern Redoubt; Fosse 8 and the Corons de Pekin and Corons de Maroc. It was then to bomb down the trenches to the south with the aim of thereby aiding 7th Division's assault. Landon was asked "to reconnoitre the ground and to submit your detailed proposals for carrying out the attack." He had five days to submit these plans for Corps review.[39] As one staff officer noted: "the whole essence of the scheme was rapidity."[40] The division had a frontage of 1,600 yards and would make the assault with two brigades. The 28th Brigade on the left was to assault the line from the Railway Work down to, but excluding, Fosse 8 and the 26th Brigade on the right had the objective of Fosse 8 together with Haisnes. The reserve brigade – the 27th Brigade – was then to either support the attack on Fosse 8 or, if that had been successful, to push onto Haisnes and Douvrin.

36 Keith Simpson, "Capper and the Offensive Spirit", *RUSI Journal* 118:2, June 1973, p.51.
37 TNA: WO95/1638/4, Capper, Note of 18 September 1915.
38 TNA: WO95/1733/2, 9th Division Special War Diary dealing with the Battle of Loos.
39 TNA: WO95/591, I Corps Order no.494 (G) 2, 22 August 1915.
40 TNA: WO95/1733/2, Lieutenant-Colonel SE Holland lecture on the part played by the 9th Division in the Battle of Loos.

9th Division took over the British line opposite the Hohenzollern Redoubt and immediately began to join up the five blinded saps, which had been created by Haking's 1st Division back in July.[41] The new fire trench would then only be 150 yards from the German frontline, as compared to the original 400 yards, and would be used to house the gas cylinders. With each battalion digging 350 yards of trenches, the new frontline was completed over the course of one night. In addition to a new support trench, each brigade had two communication trenches – one for traffic moving towards the front and one for traffic away – with the total length of new trenches dug by the division amounting to 12,000 yards. Despite the good intentions of keeping the communication trenches regulated, congestion did inevitably occur with the trenches filling with men ninety minutes before the planned assault.

Although the artillery bombardment commenced four days before the attack, the limited number of heavy guns meant that several of the enemy strongpoints, in particular the Railway Work and Mad Point on 9th Division's front, were not "properly done in".[42] There were a total of five machine-gun emplacements spread over these two positions, and the weapons were to take a terrible toll on 28th Brigade when they assaulted. The failure to deal satisfactorily with these strongpoints was later put down to the shortage of both guns and ammunition, combined with the difficulty experienced by the Forward Observation Officers, in initially finding places to observe artillery strikes from, and then in directing fire accurately onto the targets. Once the attack had commenced, steps had been taken to allow two batteries of the artillery to move forward to provide covering fire through the preparation of three roads with bridges where they crossed trenches. This was to prove successful as by mid-afternoon on 25 September, these guns came into action just south of the Hohenzollern Redoubt. But this movement created its own problems, as "it was impossible to keep any communication with the batteries who had gone forward as the line was cut almost immediately … [they] were to all intents and purpose useless at any rate [as] their fire was unobserved."[43]

Prelude to Battle

Haig reviewed Gough's plan's for the opening days of the bombardment with him on 1 September – a review which clearly went well as Haig was to note in his diary: "what an advantage it is to have a Corps commander able to command his Corps himself and knows what he wants to do without the intervention of a Staff officer!"[44]

41 A blinded, or Russian, sap was a narrow forward tunnel that did not break the surface of the ground. The sap would be broken open only immediately prior to an assault.
42 TNA: WO95/1733/2, Holland lecture.
43 Ibid., Holland lecture.
44 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 1 September 1915.

As the battle approached, practical issues were beginning to cause concern. Three weeks before the battle, 9th Division's "Q" Branch were reporting that of the 12,000 Bethune bombs held, only 3,000 had detonators: "This supply is totally inadequate to meet requirements – the matter reported to I Corps asking what can be done." The following day, the branch were complaining that the reliance on only one Rotary Duplication machine was "a cause of much inconvenience & a waste of time as it is found practically impossible to do all the work required on one machine". Two had been brought from England but the other was now located in "G" Branch six miles away, and this was causing "much extra work and needless difficulties." By 7 September, the same officer was complaining about the insufficient number of interpreters available to allow the local purchase of stores – each day was clearly presenting him with fresh challenges to overcome.[45] The pressure was slightly lifted by the "secret" news that Castelnau would not have his army ready and that the main French attack had gone back to 25 September – the secret not being particularly secure as Rawlinson remarked that he had heard of this delay three days earlier.[46]

Ten days before the battle, French had still not completely recovered from his fever. He had managed to meet with Joffre at Chantilly on the previous day but "he has not yet managed to see commanders to explain the general plan." This absence of communication lead Robertson to leak the plans to Haig. Haig commented that Robertson had "begged me not mention to the C-in-C that he had discussed the matter at all." Fortunately while "the plan is generally on the lines I had worked out", it became clear that the date was fixed "whether the day is favourable for the use of gas or not." Haig argued for a restricted front if the weather was not ideal for gas or that the attack should go in a day early if the conditions were right.[47] These suggestions were passed onto French on Thursday "but he finds it difficult to decide. Chief has just retired to bed till Saturday." Haig met with Gough and Rawlinson to discuss how plans would be modified should gas not be used – both agreed that this would inevitably require a reduced front for the attack, and the officers departed to study the effect of the change further. Haig finished the day with a letter to Robertson that argued that self-evidently the attack had to wait for the weather to work with the release of the gas as to do otherwise could only lead to "considerable loss and small progress!"[48] Haig finally met with Sir John on the Saturday – one week before the battle was due to commence – and repeated his views that if the weather did not suit, a curtailed attack against, focussing on the Hohenzollern Redoubt and Loos, was the only sensible response.[49]

On 17 September, Gough submitted his revised plans to First Army. Two options were set out: "an attack which runs greater risks of failure, but promises considerably

45 TNA: WO95/1744/2, 9th Division QMG War Diary.
46 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 4 September 1915.
47 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 15 September 1915.
48 Ibid., 16 September 1915.
49 Ibid., 18 September 1915.

greater results in case of success" and "an attack which should succeed but the consequences of which would not be as far-reaching". The riskier option recognised that dependence could only be placed on artillery, and not gas, and with the limited number of guns and ammunition available assumed a much narrower frontage of three thousand yards. The left-hand element of the original attack was to be abandoned with only 7th and 9th Divisions now taking part. Even with this reduced front, the artillery available would be insufficient to guarantee destruction of the enemy trenches but should "be enough to offer a moderately good chance of success if there is an element of surprise". This was to be achieved by starting the attack an hour before dawn. The principle of the assault was still that of "capturing the enemy's second line … in practically one rush" so did not differ significantly from previous plans. Gough's more cautious plan also resembled his previous thoughts and consisted of three phases: the initial capture of Fosse 8 by 9th Division, then the night-time capture of the German frontline by 7th and 1st Divisions and finally "if necessary, a subsequent and methodical attack on the enemy's second line", with this being expected to take between two days and a week to accomplish. Gough was not confident of success with this latter variant as during the time taken between phases "the enemy are almost certain to garrison their second line in rear."[50]

Three days later, I Corps confirmed the responsibilities for the attack. With IV Corps taking the ground to the south of the Hulluch-Vendin-le-Vieil road, Gough's objective was "to break the enemy's line south of the La Bassee Canal and to advance to the line of the canal [between] Point-a-Vendin/Bauvin." On the left, 2nd Division were to take the frontline trenches and then form a protective flank to allow 9th & 7th Divisions to push forward. In the centre of the Corps front, 9th Division were to "assault from Hohenzollern Redoubt to [the] Vermelles Triangle Railway" while 7th Division were to "assault the enemy's front trenches from the Vermelles/Hulluch road to Quarry Trench". The order contained the instruction that "it must be impressed upon all commanders that to obtain success it is essential to push on the advance with the utmost rapidity in order to take advantage of the first surprise and to prevent the enemy's reserves occupying his rearward defensive lines."[51] That same day, Haig accompanied Kitchener on a visit to the front and took the opportunity – despite Sir John's instructions to the contrary – of detailing the attack with particular reference to French's decision to hold back the General Reserve. This level of direct access to the Secretary of State for War left Haig clear that he knew "first-hand what the Government really expects of the Army. I can give my orders with much more confidence when I know that efforts on a large scale are really needed of us at the present moment."[52]

50 TNA: WO95/592, I Corps Order no.494(G)51, 17 September 1915.
51 TNA: WO95/592, I Corps' Operation Order no.106, 20 September 1915.
52 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 20 September 1915.

British soldier wearing a 1915 issue smoke helmet. (*Illustrated London News*, 11 December 1915)

With French finally back from his sickbed, he and Haig compared notes on Wednesday 22 September. Haig thought French "looked a little better, but older and fatter. He seemed in very good spirits." The conversation again focussed on the release of the reserves – "he would release the XI Corps to support me on the first possible moment. He seemed afraid that I might push the Cavalry forward too soon." As for the implications of gas not being used, French's only suggestion was that the attack be moved back from 6:30am to coincide with the French assault beginning at "9 or 10am".[53] On the assumption that the "accessory" would be used, First Army issued "Notes in Connection with the Employment of Gas in the Attack." This included the promise that "if proper precautions are taken (i.e. if gas helmets are worn and properly tucked in round the neck) men need have no fear of suffering any ill effects from gas fumes" and expressed the hope that "as we have not yet made use of gas in our attacks, it is likely that its use may come as a complete surprise to the enemy." The men were to have their smoke helmets on but not to pull them down until gas was encountered.[54]

Despite this optimism, planning for a gas-free offensive continued. 9th Division Operation Order no.26 set out the scenario that "if the weather conditions do not permit of gas being used on the morning of the 25 [September], and circumstances do not admit of offensive operations being postponed … 9th Division will attack Hohenzollern Redoubt, and will join it up with our front line trenches".[55] The action

53 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 22 September 1915.
54 TNA: WO95/592, "Notes in Connection with the Employment of Gas in the Attack", 22 September 1915.
55 TNA: WO95/1762/1, 9th Division Operation order no.26, 23 September 1915.

was to be "a night attack to capture the West end of Hohenzollern Redoubt … and will be carried out in silence by two companies of 7th Seaforth Highlanders" with the "stormers" being followed up by reserve troops carrying two Lewis machine-guns. Parties of bombers were then to advance sixty yards down the connecting trenches and block off Big Willie, South Face, North Face and Little Willie trenches. 90th Field Company of the Royal Engineers was then to consolidate the new front line into the British lines at K and L Saps.[56]

As the artillery bombardment continued, feint attacks were simulated by varying the rate of fire on the frontline trenches with the aim of deceiving the enemy into believing that an assault was about to occur. Divisions were ordered to do "everything possible to make enemy believe an attack is imminent … bayonets will be shown over parapets; dummies will be placed on parapets and men will shout. Pipes and bugles will sound the charge."[57] As troops returned to their defensive positions, the bombardment was then resumed to catch them in an exposed position. The CRA war diary noted that "two of these feints were reported to have achieved their object" but by the fourth night the Germans were becoming wise to this trick.[58]

On the day before the battle, Haig met with Rawlinson and Gough at 2pm and promised them a decision by 10:00pm as to whether the attack would proceed, and in which format – with or without gas. The degree of uncertainty is clear from the fact that should gas be used, Gough was told his attack would be made at 3:30am. French and Robertson arrived at Haig's HQ by 7:30pm with the news that Foch was to attack at 11:00am in the morning. French, having agreed with Haig's proposed timings, then departed for his base at Chateau Philomel, twenty-five miles behind the front with Haig left wondering how effective control was to be executed from this far away. With his weather expert, Mr. Gold reporting "weather unsettled and showery at first, probably improving later", Haig gave the orders for the troops to enter the trenches with officers being asked to pass on the following: "Chief wishes troops to be informed that he feels confident they will realize [sic] how much our success in the forthcoming operations depends upon the individual efforts of each officer, non-commissioned officer and man. He wishes this to be conveyed to them verbally and in such a manner as not to disclose our intentions to the enemy."[59]

Haig's diary entry for the day of the attack summed up his thoughts: "An anxious night wondering all the time what the wind would be in the morning! The greatest battle in the world's history begins today. Some 800,000 French and British troops will actually attack to-day." By 3am, with Gold predicting that "the wind would probably be stronger just after sunrise", Haig fixed zero hour at 5:30am with the attack

56 Ibid., 26th Infantry Brigade Order no.52, 23 September 1915.
57 TNA: WO95/592, I Corps, Order no.494 (G) 60, 20 September 1915.
58 TNA: WO95/619, CRA War Diary, 24 September 1915.
59 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 24th September. WO 95/592, First Army order CA916, 24 September 1915.

commencing at 6:30am. At 5am, after the well-reported incident of Haig watching the smoke from Alan Fletcher's cigarette drifting "in puffs towards the N.E.", the order was finally given to proceed – "the leaves of the poplar trees gently rustled. This seemed satisfactory. But what a risk I must run of the gas blowing back upon our own dense masses of troops."[60] The typewritten order had had the precise timing left blank and this was now completed: "the hour of Zero is 5:50am. Gas will, therefore be started everywhere at 5:50am. The Givenchy assault will take place at 6am. The main attack south of canal will take place at 6.30am. Acknowledge by wire."[61]

The Battle

Despite a late request from First Army, twenty-five minutes before zero hour, "to ask if it would be possible to stop arrangements for attack", the battle was underway.[62] 7th Division was to capture Gun Trench and the Quarries and then to take the German second defensive line between Hulluch and Cite St. Elie – the line here was dominated by the *Stutzpunkt II* defensive work. 20th and 22nd Brigades were to lead the assault with 21st Brigade being held in reserve. 20th Brigade's attack would be carried out by 2nd Gordon Highlanders and the 8th Devonshire Regiment who were to take Breslau Trench. With gas lingering in no man's land due to very light winds from the southwest, it was the condition of the enemy wire that became crucial. Advancing through well-cut wire the 2nd Gordons were in the German frontline within twelve minutes – but lost their commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel J.R.E. Stansfield, who fell mortally wounded. Conversely, the 8th Devons found the wire substantially intact and suffered heavy casualties as they tried to force their way through. Leading from the front, their officers paid a high price, with just three out of nineteen reaching the German lines.

Nevertheless, the attackers gained ground. Although weakened by casualties, the 2nd Gordons pressed on, took Gun Trench and reached the Lens road by 8:45am where they were joined subsequently by the survivors of the 8th Devons. The advance could go no further at this point due to fire coming from the defiant *Stutzpunkt II*.

To the left of 20th Brigade, 22nd Brigade was to assault a 600-yard front where the fact that the German wire had been destroyed was concealed by long grass. The 1st South Staffordshire Regiment and the 2nd Royal Warwickshire Regiment took heavy losses from enfilade fire but, with the assistance of the 1st Royal Welch Fusiliers [RWF], captured the front and support trenches by 7.30am. The attack was then continued by the 2nd Queen's who seized the Quarries by 9.30am. A small party of South Staffordshires reached Cite Trench but were soon forced to withdraw due to heavy fire coming from Cite St. Elie. By 3pm the Quarries had been converted into

60 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 25 September 1915.
61 TNA: WO95/619, I Corps Order no.494 (G) 74, 25 September 1915.
62 TNA: WO95/592, I Corps war diary, 25 September 1915.

a British defensive position, being further strengthened with the addition of barbed wire in the evening and subsequent night.

7th Division's reserve, 21st Brigade was broken up by Capper with the 2nd Bedfordshire Regiment and the 2nd Wiltshire Regiment being passed through 20th Brigade at 10:14am to attack the fortified village of Hulluch. Unfortunately they got no further than Gun Trench. The 2nd Yorkshire Regiment & 1st/4th Cameron Highlanders got as far as the Quarries, where they remained. Faced with Cite Trench and the heavily fortified Cite St Elie, the 21st Brigade held its position while the defences were subjected to a renewed bombardment. However, this failed to inflict any significant damage and, with just one battalion in hand, Capper called off the attack on the village. There was no point in rushing the operation, as Capper felt that: "with three additional battalions there is a fair chance of success provided there is a heavy bombardment and plenty of time."[63] The evening of 25 September saw the 2nd Gordons and the 6th Gordons close to the Lens-La Bassee road; to their left the remains of 20th Brigade and part of 21st Brigade held Gun Trench up to Stone Alley while the rest of 21st Brigade held Stone Alley and the southern side of the Quarries. The remainder of the Quarries was held by 22nd Brigade. At 1:30am the Germans counter-attacked and partially retook the area. A subsequent counter–attack by 7th Division at 7:30am failed to evict the enemy.

To the left of 7th Division, 9th Division became the first of the New Army divisions to see battle. Its baptism of fire was to see it attack three significant locations: the mine buildings of Fosse 8; its associated slag heap, the twenty feet high Dump and the most strongly fortified defensive work on the Loos front – the Hohenzollern Redoubt. The Redoubt was a 300-yard, fully wired defensive enclosure that sat on a slight rise in front of the mining village and was linked back to the main German front line via the Big Willie and Little Willie Trenches. 26th and 28th Brigades were charged with taking these three features and then pressing on to the Lens-La Bassee road in front of which lay the second German defensive line – Pekin and Cite Trenches – and the two fortified villages of Haisnes and Cite St. Elie.

9th Division's objectives for the battle were as follows: 26th Brigade, with the 5th Cameron Highlanders on the left and the 7th Seaforths on the right with the 8th Gordons and the 8th Black Watch in reserve, had the Hohenzollern Redoubt, the Dump, the Trois Cabarets crossroads and the Corons de Pekin as objectives and the villages of Haisnes and Douvrin as their final targets – provoking the caustic comment from one officer that "it seems to be forgotten that infantry don't gallop". As mentioned, the brigade had taken steps in advance to improve the chances of success of the operation by digging blinded saps forward from the original front line to reduce the distance to the Redoubt to 150 yards.[64] To its left, 28th Brigade was to aim for the junction of Train Alley and Les Briques railway after which it was to join with 26th

63 Ibid., 25 September 1915.
64 OH 1915 Vol.2, pp.236-237.

Contemporary artist's impression of 15th (Scottish) Division troops storming German trenches on the opening day of the Loos offensive. (*Illustrated London News*, 9 October 1915)

Brigade in its advance on Douvrin. Leading this were the 6th King's Own Scottish Borderers [KOSB] and the 10th Highland Light Infantry [HLI] with the 11th HLI and the 9th Scottish Rifles in reserve. Should the 2nd Division to the immediate north fail in its advance, a defensive flank was to be formed to protect the attacking forces to the south. The 27th Brigade was in divisional reserve in the Lancashire and Grenay trench lines and comprised the 11th and 12th Royal Scots, the 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers and the 10th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

Despite a light breeze that barely moved the gas and smoke clouds, the 7th Seaforths surged through well-cut gaps in the wire to get into the Redoubt and then bomb their way up to the original German frontline. The advance was rapid and this process only took thirty minutes. The next half hour saw them clear the miners' cottages, the mine buildings and the Dump so that by 7:30 – one hour after zero hour – they were at the Trois Cabarets crossroads. To the left of the Seaforths, the 5th Camerons had delayed their attack by ten minutes "due to an insufficiency of wind to carry the gas" towards the German trenches. When the wind refused to change the Camerons attacked regardless. Despite severe casualties – "the first three lines were practically wiped out" – caused by enfilade fire, initially from Mad Point and subsequently from the Madagascar cottages, the fourth line reached Fosse Trench by 7:10am and thirty-five minutes later also arrived at Trois Cabarets. The cost had been heavy – of the twenty officers and eight hundred men that set out, only two officers with one hundred men reached their objective. At this point both battalions were ordered to convert the deliberately flooded Corons Trench into a fire trench to protect the captured Fosse 8.

The 8th Gordons and some Black Watch moved forward to begin the assault on the next objective, Pekin Trench with the after-action report noting: "some opposition was met with and dealt with from Germans who had been in the deep dug-outs".[65] Lloyd suggests that no prisoners were taken in this advance but this is not made clear in the report, perhaps for understandable reasons.[66] Although undamaged by any artillery fire, the trench was unoccupied and the force arrived at the wire by 8:05am and shortly after occupied Pekin Trench. Unfortunately, the failure of 2nd Division and 28th Brigade to make any significant advances left this position exposed to attack from both the north and the northeast. By 10:30am, the trench was being held by a combined force of 750 men.

To the left, the 28th Brigade had not experienced success. The wind, slight elsewhere but in generally the right direction, was from the southeast in their area. The released gas had blown backwards into the British frontline causing casualties, with the situation being worsened when some gas cylinders were hit by German artillery. Having left the gas-filled British trenches, the brigade then had to advance across open ground with no assistance from either the gas or smoke clouds. This attack was towards the three strongpoints of Railway Redoubt, Mad Point and Strong Point with only Mad Point having taken any significant damage from artillery fire. Pressing forward regardless, the 6th KOSB approached the German frontline only to fall into a concealed ditch filled with barbed wire and stakes. The advancing troops bunched up to avoid this obstacle but in the process were exposed to heavy enfilade machine-gun fire from Strong Point. The casualties were devastating. Of the nineteen officers in the 6th KOSB, twelve were killed and the remaining seven wounded; by the end of the day the Official History notes: "no more than 46 men under a corporal could be assembled". The 10th HLI advanced in front of the Railway Redoubt with the first line being "practically annihilated before it had gone twenty yards" and the second and third lines faring little better.[67] Support was provided by the 11th HLI and the 9th Scottish Rifles but relentless machine-gun fire from the German strong points prevented any further advance. Gough, unaware of the severity of 28th Brigade's casualties, ordered the two battalions to attempt to take Madagascar Trench. The attack reached the German wire – and in one case got into an empty German front-line – but the losses taken reduced the brigade to such an extent that at 10:50am it was withdrawn to defend the original frontline. The failure of 28th Brigade to take its objectives prevented the neighbouring 26th Brigade from continuing its attack. Three battalions were now required to hold Fosse 8 thereby reducing the number of troops who were to advance on Haisnes.

By midday, a 1,500-yard stretch of Pekin Trench was strongly held by a combination of 8th Gordons and 11th and 12th Royal Scots but these troops came under increasingly

65 TNA: WO95/1762/1, 26th Brigade Report.
66 Lloyd, *Loos*, p.138.
67 OH 1915 p.241.

heavy artillery fire from both flanks. German troops began to bomb their way into the occupied trench from both the northern and southern connecting trenches, taking advantage of their superior grenades that outperformed and outreached the improvised British bombs. 28th Brigade made another attempt to advance at 12:15pm, but was again thrown back with further heavy casualties. At 5pm, with the length of occupied trench now reduced to 800 yards, officers on the scene took the decision to pull the eight hundred troops back to Fosse Alley. By the end of the day, 27th Brigade was holding Fosse Alley north from the Quarries with 26th Brigade holding the Corons de Pekin. 28th Brigade, however, was back in the trenches where they had begun the day, having failed to make any advance. The situation was summed up by 9th Division's CRE: "[the] failure of our scheme [was] apparent to all. Yet no steps taken to make good the tactical point MADASCAR [sic] TRENCH. So obvious, foreseen & nothing done!"[68]

At 10 pm, Sir John French issued the following message: "At sunset of the first day of the great battle we have now commenced, the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief desires to convey to the First Army his hearty congratulations and warmest thanks for the splendid work accomplished. He feels confident that the fine courage and magnificent spirit which animate all ranks will ensure a speedy victory over the enemy."[69] Haig wrote in his diary: "the day had been a very satisfactory one on the whole. We have captured 8,000 yards of German front, and advanced in places two miles from our old line. This is the largest advance made on the Western front [sic] since this kind of warfare started."[70] Gough, however, was disappointed that the achievements of 7th and 9th Divisions had not been built upon by the timely use of available reserve troops: "What was required was the arrival of three infantry brigades, fresh and in good order, (i.e. the division of the general reserve) … Such a reinforcement would have carried the whole of that portion of the German line of defence."[71]

The issue of the release of the General Reserve has been covered in detail by Lloyd. In summary, Haig had asked for the release of the reserves at 8:45am but was unable to see French until 11:30am at which point French agreed "to put Haking under my [Haig's] order, less the Guards Division." Confirmation of this instruction was not received until 2pm so it was not until then that orders were issued for Haking "to advance between Hulluch and Cite St. Auguste, and occupy the high ground between Pont a Vendin and Haisnes". But it was now too late in the day for the reserves to have any material effect.[72] The Guards Division was not given to Haig until noon on the following day – "still too far distant to intervene" – and did not reach the original British frontline until 4pm on the second day of the battle. Haig wrote directly to

68 TNA: WO95/1749/1, CRE War Diary, 25 September 1915.
69 TNA: WO95/592, French to First Army, order G.182, 25 September 1915.
70 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 25 September 1915.
71 OH 1915, p.250.
72 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 25 September 1915.

Kitchener on 29 September reminding him of his original requests for getting control of the reserves and reporting the consequences of this happening: "I think it right that you should know how the lessons which have been learnt in the war at such cost have been neglected! We were in a position to make this the turning point in the war, and I still hope we may do so, but naturally I feel annoyed at the lost opportunity."[73] Haig confided to his diary his views of French: "it seems impossible to discuss military problems with an unreasoning brain of this kind!"[74] French's response – "my own personal version of the affair" – was not sufficiently convincing to prevent his ultimate replacement by Haig as the BEF's Commander-in-Chief later that year.[75]

On the second day of the battle, Capper became the first of three costly senior officer casualties at Loos. Following the loss of the Quarries during the night of 25-26 September, a counter-attack was carried out the following day by Carter's Detachment. Capper had gone forward to monitor the assault when he was wounded by gun fire. 7th Division's ADMS war diary for that day initially noted that "the GOC Sir Thompson Capper, bullet wound of left chest, serious, was evacuated tonight direct to No.6 CCS [Casualty Clearing Station] at Lillers, a medical officer Capt. O'Reilly personally taking him there." O'Reilly had gone out at 8pm to bring Capper in from the battlefield (the war diary suggests that Capper had been wounded at 5:50pm) and had arranged for the wound to be dressed at the Divisional Collecting Station before onward transfer to the CCS – O'Reilly was subsequently recommended for the Military Cross. However the diary went on to record that Capper had died the following morning.[76] Gough took the loss of this well-regarded officer heavily:

> There was no man who had left a greater or a more valuable impression on the character and training of the British Staff. An ardent student of his profession, with a strong and taking personality, he had not only set the highest standard of professional knowledge, during the years in which he was Professor at the Camberley Staff College and Commandant of the one at Quetta previous to the war, but he had also inspired those around him with the noblest ideals of duty and unselfish devotion.[77]

The divisional history observed that Capper was:

> a fighting man, who courted danger and was ready to face every risk himself that he asked his men to encounter, he had set his stamp on the Division; his energy, his vigour, and his talents as a trainer of troops had contributed their share to its

73 Ibid., Haig to Kitchener, 29 September 1915.
74 Ibid., 2 October 1915.
75 Ibid., French to Kitchener, 9 October 1915.
76 TNA: WO95/1640/3, ADMS War Diary, 26 and 27 September 1915.
77 Gough, *Fifth Army*, pp.114-115.

making and frequent remaking no less than his personal bravery and readiness to assume responsibility.[78]

Haig received further bad news of another casualty the following day when he was with Gough at I Corps Headquarters. With heavy fighting going on at the Hohenzollern Redoubt, Thesiger had gone forward to reconnoitre the situation on the western face of the Redoubt when he was killed along with two staff officers, his GSO2 Major Edward Le Mottee and his *aide-de camp* Lieutenant Gilbert Burney. Gough remembered that "Haig was visibly worried and, as is often the case under such circumstances, he was sharp – perhaps I might say, without injustice, cross: I also must have been very worried".[79] The divisional history said of Thesiger: "though his career with the Ninth had been brief, he had proved himself a sterling and able commander, and his death at the crisis of the battle was a serious calamity."[80] This was not the first time Thesiger had gone forward – a report in 27th Brigade's files notes that at 3:30pm on 25 September, he had left his HQ and had been giving orders in Fosse Alley.[81] Gough initially put Major-General E.S. Bulfin in acting charge of 9th Division before Brigadier-General W.T. Furse was given command of the division on the following day.

These two losses together with the death of Major-General Frederick Wing, commanding 12th Division, who was killed on 2 October, prompted Robertson to write to First Army HQ in early October noting that the loss of three divisional commanders during the battle "are losses the Army can ill afford" and continuing to "call attention to the necessity of guarding against a tendency on the part of senior officers such as Divisional and Corps Commanders to take up positions too far forward when fighting is in progress." While acknowledging that in certain instances "it may be necessary for a divisional general to place himself amongst them [the troops], either to direct their efforts or to inspire them by his personal example" – these were exceptional and it was vital "for the efficient control of the operations and for purposes of intercommunication with superiors and with neighbouring operations that the positions of Divisional Commanders during a fight should be sufficiently withdrawn to prevent these officers being unduly influenced by merely local events".[82]

At 3:30pm on the third day of the battle, 9th Division was withdrawn from the line into GHQ Reserve, but 7th Division was to remain in place until it was finally

78 C.T. Atkinson, *The Seventh Division*, 1914-1918, (London: John Murray, 1927), p.223.
79 Gough, *Fifth Army*, p.116.
80 John Ewing, *The History of the 9th (Scottish) Division*, 1914-1919, (London: John Murray, 1921), p.53.
81 TNA: WO95/1769/1, 27th Brigade Report.
82 TNA: WO95/1629/3, W R Robertson to First Army, 3 October 1915.

withdrawn three days after the end of the battle on 16-17 October.[83] Gough was fulsome in his praise of 9th Division as it left the line:

> On leaving I Corps, the G.O.C. wishes to tell the 9th Division that he thinks their conduct in the assault on the German lines was beyond all praise, and no words can express the value of their gallantry and self-sacrifice to our country. They showed during the heavy fighting, not only great dash and courage, but endurance and discipline, and the highest qualities of a soldier. He can only wish them the best of all fortune in their future efforts, and he is sure they will maintain the high standard as soldiers that they have already reached.[84]

The battle was to continue to mid-October, but the following days saw the Germans swiftly strengthen their defences and launch a series of furious counter-attacks. The Germans recaptured the Hohenzollern Redoubt on 3 October but their further attacks were repulsed. A final British assault against the Redoubt was launched on 13 October; its failure marked the end of the battle.[85]

Lessons Learned?

A week before the official end of the battle, J.F. Gathorne-Hardy, General Staff 7th Division, had already requested his Brigade Commanders to report back on "any lessons which you think can be deduced from them [the recent operations]. It is important that the causes which led to failure as well as those which led to success should be carefully analysed, so that we may avoid the one in the future, and exploit the other." While Gathorne-Hardy saw successes in the rapid capture of the first line and the degree to which the wire had been cut, there were also failures including the time taken to clear out pockets of resistance, an inability to retake the Quarries and Gun Trench, the unfortunate shelling of the Quarries while they were still occupied by friendly forces and the inability to extract from leading units "an exact account of their position." These failures can be distilled to two areas: failure to take areas that were occupied by enemy forces and the poor communications of the state of the battle in progress.[86]

Brigadier-General Hon. J.F.H-S-F. Trefusis, commanding 20th Infantry Brigade, set out his thoughts in a six-page response.[87] Acknowledging the use of gas and smoke,

83 TNA: WO95/619, I Corps Operation Order no.108, 28 September; I Corps Operation Order No.108, 15 October 1915.
84 TNA: WO95/592, Gough to 9th Division, I Corps order no.4110, 30 September 1915.
85 The final British attack on the Hohenzollern Redoubt is examined in detail by Michael Woods elsewhere in this volume.
86 TNA: WO95/1629/3, Gathorne-Hardy to Brigade Commanders, 5 October 1915.
87 John Frederick Hepburn-Stuart-Forbes Trefusis was killed after being shot through the head by a sniper ten days after Loos – at 37 years and 9 months old, he was the youngest

he felt their results came more from the moral rather than the physical effects they had: "as far as I am aware very few Germans were killed by gas, but many more were frightened by it and retired." Another observer stated that "there is no doubt that the combination of smoke and gas had a great moral effect on the Germans [but] there were few signs of the Germans being disabled by the gas". Worryingly, he noted that where gas had blown back into the British trenches and gassed some of the assaulting troops "these men … were back at duty in three days which does not speak very well for the deadliness of the gas."[88] Trefusis disagreed with Gathorne-Hardy on the state of the wire as that in front of the Pope's Nose Redoubt had not been cut; this, together with the low winds that allowed the smoke and gas to linger in front of the German wire, had lead to delays in taking the strongpoint. He agreed that communications needed reviewing as he had only received updates via battalion runners, adding "the telephone system broke down, so did the large Deitz discs[89] which were issued. Men with telephone wire followed up the leading battalions immediately behind the assault … but they were in every case shot, except one … but this wire was cut by shells."[90] The range of grenades used was criticised, in particular the unsuitability of the Bethune and Ball bombs, which were virtually unusable in wet conditions – large quantities of Mills grenades were recommended for future operations. Trefusis' report concluded that the failure at the second line had been caused by "the lack of sufficiently large reserves ready to come up speedily … had it been possible to have foreseen the rapidity which the advance took place, the situation would have been coped with."[91]

As Trefusis had noted, the wide variety of bombs used was seen in retrospect as having over-complicated the pressures placed on the bomb-throwers with an inevitable reduction to their effectiveness. 9th Division's "Q" Branch observed that while "the bomb supply was sufficient, if a universal pattern of bomb could be adopted, more value would be gained from the use of bombs – a man, even if an expert, in the heat of battle does not want to be bothered with having to consider whether he is using a Pitcher, Ball, Bethune or Mills bomb."[92] The weather conditions were also to have a significant effect on the effectiveness of certain type of bombs – in 7th Division, of the 24,500 Ball grenades supplied, it was estimated that 80% of the Brock lighters

Brigadier-General in the Army.

88 TNA: WO95/1733/2, Holland lecture.

89 The "Venetian Blind" Deitz discs were a communication system which consisted of two foot square dials mounted on twelve feet long poles and proved somewhat clumsy on the battlefield.

90 Lieutenant-Colonel R.M. Ovens, commanding 1st South Staffordshire Regiment, had personally picked up and carried forward the telephone wire when his men had been hit by enemy fire. TNA: WO95/1660/3, Report on Operations by 22nd Infantry Brigade.

91 TNA: WO95/1629/3, Trefusis, After-action report 6 October 1915.

92 TNA: WO95/1744/2, 9th Division QMG War Diary.

"failed to ignite because of the heads of the lighters got damp and eventually came off altogether from friction against damp equipment".[93]

Major-General H.E. Watts, Capper's replacement as GOC 7th Division, summed up the operations with the observation that "the question of the possibility of breaking both first and second lines with one rush has long been a matter of controversy, and, in spite of the surprise use of a new weapon in the recent operations, still remains unsolved." Noting that the 7th Division, after taking heavy casualties, had "failed to completely clear the front German trench for some considerable time … [and] … therefore lacked the necessary weight and energy to push on the second objective", Watts felt that a more limited set of initial objectives, together with a lowered expectation of the likely success from the employment of gas, may well have seen a more satisfactory outcome on the day. On the use of gas and smoke, Watts remained "doubtful whether the effect of this weapon will lead to such satisfactory results in the future, except possibly through its employment at night." A failure to clear the pockets of resistance having taken the majority of the front-line meant that enemy troops who were "perfectly ready to surrender at the moment of assault, were enabled subsequently to inflict considerable loss and delay on our men because there was no-one in the immediate neighbourhood to take them prisoners." Efficient communications also seemed to Watts to present "an almost insuperable difficulty."[94]

Captured at Loos: German field guns on public display at Horse Guards Parade.
(*The War Illustrated*, 13 November 1915)

93 TNA: WO95/1636/6, A/QMG "Report on the operations near Loos".
94 TNA: WO95/1652/1, Watts, Notes on Operations, 8 October 1915.

Brigadier J.G. Rotton, commanding 7th Division Artillery, provided further insights when he observed that attacks tended to be divided into one of two types – a "rush through" a series of defensive lines or the taking of the first line with subsequent consolidation and bombardment of the second line. Adherence to one or the other was vital as "a combination of both seems doomed to failure." The lack of sufficient fresh reserves at the appropriate point meant that the second line could not be "rushed", while the decision not to consolidate on the first line left the second German defensive line intact. Rotton noted that while the "effect of the gas was negligible … only a panic would have made it possible to break through … steady infantry behind wire such as existed at St Elie and Hulluch could not be rushed." While Rotton felt that there were sufficient guns forward by midday to conduct "a concerted attack on the second line … fresh troops were needed to carry such an attack through". Over the night of 25-26 September, the Quarries were lost, Rotton believed, through a combination of "loss of officers, confusion of units and general disorganisation" while Gun Trench "seems to have been lost owing to the exhaustion of the men holding the trench." Rotton also wrote a six-page memorandum dealing with the specific issues facing his artillery throughout the battle.[95]

In a lecture on the battle given later by Lieutenant-Colonel S.E. Holland, 9th Division General Staff, he identified several points to improve performance. These included:

- the use of mines and trench mortars, particularly by using smoke bombs, to obscure the enemy strongpoints and then to keep these works under heavy enfilade machine gun fire "to keep the enemy's heads down",
- assistance by the infantry in the observation of the success of the artillery fire in cutting wire and targeting strongpoints,
- the provision of a mobile light mortar that could be taken forward with the advancing infantry,
- the need for new communications systems that would resist enemy fire without which reliance had to be placed on the use of runners,
- the need for Brigade Headquarters to be as far forward as possible but to remain fixed in place so as to retain communications with the Divisional HQ and
- the poor staff training of the Royal Engineers Special companies.[96]

9th Division's post-war history was scathing in its criticism of the way the division had been utilised: it referred to the "extravagant hopes entertained of the power of gas to demoralise the enemy" while the secondary attacks on the morning of the 25 September were described as "an offence against a well-understood principle that … when men have failed in an attack, it is generally futile to send other men to make

95 TNA: WO95/1638/4, Rotton, 10 October 1915.
96 TNA: WO95/1733/2, Holland lecture.

another attack in the same way … persistence in a frontal attack showed a serious lack of flexibility in the Higher Command in making use of the resources of the Division."[97] Unsurprisingly, the history was rather more positive about the men of the division:

> When the Division was withdrawn from the conflict, it had solidly established its reputation as a first-rate fighting division. From the men's point of view the main thing achieved was that they had measured themselves against the Germans at their best and had proved themselves the better men … in future actions, the men always entered into the fray with the consciousness of superiority that is the fundamental basis of moral [sic].[98]

The performance of the 9th Division contrasted sharply with the other two New Army divisions. The 21st and 24th Divisions had not reacted well to coming under fire for the first time with reports reaching Haig that "the whole mass of infantry of the two new Divisions was running away in great disorder, and had abandoned our guns".[99] The following day, Haig noted that "being new Divisions the battalions did not know how to look after themselves." General Hobbs was sent to find "how far the Divisional commanders can be held responsible for the want of management" and the divisions were withdrawn "for training" on the 28 September – "they should have had experience in the trenches before being sent into a great battle!"[100]

In conclusion, it is clear that the BEF's senior commanders thought long and hard about Loos – a battle they did not ideally want to fight. The successes of the opening day could not be repeated, and much ground taken in the first twenty four hours was lost to German counter-attacks. But from the above after-action analysis, it can be seen that those who were to plan future campaigns were learning from their mistakes. Gas was not used again in the same manner; the importance of improved communication systems had become obvious; weapons that functioned efficiently were required; and it was identified that over-optimism in setting objectives, the need for thorough training of the New Armies, and the requirement for the correct level of reserves used at the appropriate time were all problems that had to be overcome if the campaigns to come were going to prove successful. Not all the lessons were learned by 1 July 1916 but in retrospect, the Battle of Loos can rightly be seen as the BEF moving from its pre-war structure to the "hardened meritocracy" it would become.[101]

97 Ewing, *9th (Scottish) Division*, pp.38-39.
98 Ibid., p.57.
99 TNA: WO256/5, Haig Diary, 26 September 1915.
100 Ibid., 28 September 1915.
101 Lloyd, *Loos*, p.16.

14

8th Division and the Action at Bois Grenier, 25 September 1915

Alun Thomas

Introduction

8th Infantry Division was a peculiar entity in the British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front from 1914 to 1918, being a war-raised Regular division. It had been formed when it was realised that the size of the initial BEF was not enough. Its units returned from across the Empire. For example, 2nd Lincolnshires had been in Bermuda, guarding the Royal Navy Dockyard and 2nd Scottish Rifles had been part of the Malta garrison. However, its support units were extemporised, so that the heavy artillery battery had to make do with 4.7-inch guns, last used in the Boer War, instead of the 60-pounder guns that equipped the original Regular divisions. The medical units came from Territorial divisions that had been sent to India to replace the Regular units that had been sent to the Western Front.[1] 8th Division was to be part of IV Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Rawlinson.

The offensive operations that the BEF took part in during the spring, summer and autumn of 1915 were the first large-scale British attacks of the war. These were the Battles of Neuve Chapelle in March, Aubers Ridge and Festubert in May and Loos in September, running into October. Furthermore, the BEF faced a major German attack at Ypres in April and May, which added a new dimension to warfare by its use of poison gas as a weapon.

The offensive operations were examined closely at the time by the army, and subsequently by modern historians. Prior and Wilson argue that Rawlinson, who commanded at Neuve Chapelle, Aubers and Loos, misread the reasons why initial success at Neuve Chapelle was followed by failure. The fact that subsequent assaults would have less effective fire support due to the degrading of command and control

1 See Lt-Colonel J. H. Boraston & Captain Cyril E. O. Bax, *The Eighth Division 1914-1918* (London: The Medici Society, 1926), pp. 1-2.

after the initial 'break-in' was not recognised.[2] Jonathan Bailey has shown that the misunderstood 'solution' was that destruction was not as effective as neutralisation of the enemy. Furthermore, the latter permitted further operations to take place on ground that had not been turned into a shelled morass.[3] Paul Harris and Sanders Marble have contended that the BEF was divided into a number of differing schools of thought. Rawlinson and artilleryman John Du Cane supported a doctrine of 'bite and hold', setting limited objectives and capturing ground of tactical significance. Seizing important terrain would force the Germans to counter attack in an attempt to retake it, only to be destroyed by the firepower of the waiting British defenders. Others supported the notion that 'breakthrough' was possible, a view that led to Haig's failure at Aubers Ridge, where he tried to do too much with too little.[4] This is, perhaps, the dominant motif of the BEF's experiences in 1915. These experiences were certainly shared by 8th Division. The chapter examines the experience of 8th Division in one 'stand-alone' diversionary attack in September 1915 having first examined the difficulties faced by the BEF in conducting attacks at this time.

The Tactical Dilemma

Even before its arrival in France and Flanders, 8th Division was briefed by Rawlinson about the tactical and operational situation that the BEF now found itself in. For example, a pamphlet was issued to all officers entitled, 'Lecture delivered by Brig-General R. A. K. Montgomery, C.B., D.S.O.', At the Camp of the 8th Division, near Winchester, on the 30th October 1914.[5] In the pamphlet, noteworthy for its use of a question and answer format as well as the traditional didactic style, salient points were emphasised. Both Rawlinson and Montgomery identified the need to put forward trenches on reverse slopes and that the ranges involved for small arms were far shorter than previously experienced in the Boer War. Also stressed was the necessity for very close co-operation between the infantry and artillery and the benefits of aerial observation.

For an infantry attack to succeed, the assaulting infantry has to be able to progress from its start line to the enemy position without coming under accurate enemy fire

2 Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 69-70.

3 Jonathan Bailey, 'British Artillery in the Great War', in Paddy Griffith, ed., *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (Ilford: Portland Oregon: Frank Cass, 1999), pp 28-9.

4 Paul Harris and Sanders Marble, 'British Military Thought and Operational Method on the Western Front, 1915-1917', *War in History* 2008 15 (1), pp 18-31.

5 Copy in the papers of Captain (later Major) Alldridge, the Quartermaster of 2nd Rifle Brigade for the whole of its service in France and Flanders between 1914 and 1918. He was a very well admired and respected officer who had risen from the ranks, like almost all Quartermasters. He became advisor and confidant to many of the battalion's commanding officers (see his obituary in *The Rifle Brigade Chronicle, 1948*). J. H. Alldridge Papers, Imperial War Museum, London, reference 79/23/1.

that would cause enough casualties for the attack to be destroyed or halted. In other words, there must be a device or tactic used that keeps the enemy under protective shelter, rather than occupying their fighting posts, for so long that the assault is in their position before they have time to react. It must also not be hindered by any obstacle, either natural or man-made, that would allow the defender additional time to react so that the attack is more likely to fail.

The infantry attacks by the BEF in 1915 were dependant on support from the main weapon system possessed by the army at the time. This was artillery. Though machine guns were used, they were taken forward in order to defend captured positions and localities. Apart from the 'bomb' or grenade, the development of which was still in its infancy, the infantry unit possessed no individual or squad weapon apart from the rifle, bayonet and pistol. Therefore, if the artillery failed to carry out its mission, at the least the attack became more difficult. Often artillery ineffectiveness would cause the attack to miscarry and the assaulting troops would suffer casualties.

The battle of Neuve Chapelle in March 1915 provided a framework of attack for the British Army for the next two years. Its use of aerial photographs to create trench maps, the taking of the assault troops out of the line to train and rehearse beforehand, the use of a network of telephones for command and control, especially of artillery, wire cutting using shrapnel fired from field-artillery, the emplacement of new batteries surreptitiously at night, and the carrying out of artillery registration in such a manner that surprise was kept were all innovations worthy of acclaim.[6]

However, three of the most vital lessons were overlooked or misread. Firstly, obstacles such as barbed wire were seen as the problem. However, it was not the obstacle that was the hindrance. It was the fire from the troops behind the obstacle that caused the casualties and stopped the advance. If there was no covering fire from small arms or artillery then the physical obstacle was simply a difficulty to be overcome by engineers or pioneers.[7] The destruction by artillery of the obstacle, whether wire or trench, became seen, incorrectly, as the reason for the initial success at Neuve Chapelle. This led to the second lesson that was overlooked or misread. The attack came as a surprise, one of the cardinal virtues in military planning. However, the belief that the requirement to obtain obstacle destruction was paramount meant that surprise was lost. This in turn led to the third lesson that was overlooked. The reason why the bombardment worked was not how long or how short was its duration, but the intensity. The defenders were surprised, "not at being attacked but by the intensity of the bombardment they were receiving, for this was the heaviest artillery bombardment ever fired in warfare to that date."[8]

6 Bidwell and Graham, *Firepower*, p. 73.
7 "An obstacle without covering fire is no obstacle". This maxim was imparted to the present author during British Army infantry training in the 1980s and was just as true in 1915.
8 Hogg, *The Guns1914-18* (London: Pan Books, 1973), p. 54.

What was unheeded was that it is far more effective to fire ten shells at a trench that all land in under a minute than to fire the same number of shells over half an hour or an hour. It was the sheer intensity that deafened and disorientated, so that rational thought by the defenders, and hence resistance, was impossible. This took a long time to determine. As detailed elsewhere in this volume, at the time of Neuve Chapelle and the battles of 1915, a general shortage of shells was prevalent in the British Army. The Army had to wait until industrial production had expanded before it had enough guns and ammunition to achieve the intensity of bombardment required. Additionally, it would take time to train the artillery to use their weapon system so it was at its most efficient and effective.

The analysis of the artillery plan's effects came to an incorrect conclusion and confused the debate over the objectives that an attack was intended to achieve. The accepted aim was to achieve a breakthrough through which the cavalry could move to roll up the enemy line or even carry out an extended ride through the enemy's rear, wreaking the kind of havoc achieved by Shelby and Sheridan in the American Civil War. However, Rawlinson, after Neuve Chapelle, began to develop a different viewpoint. He wrote:

> He [Haig] expects to get the cavalry through with the next big push, but I very much doubt if he will succeed in doing more than kill a large number of gallant men without effecting any great triumph. I shall be content with capturing another piece out of the enemy's line of trenches and waiting for the counter attack. I am not a believer in the cavalry raid, which even if it comes off, will not effect very much …[9]

Rawlinson's ideas crystallised into what became known as 'bite and hold'. There was to be, however, no clearly accepted vision of the aim of the offensive operation for some time. This was to bedevil the tactical development of the BEF until early to mid-1917.

After Neuve Chapelle, 8th Division's next offensive operation was at Aubers Ridge in early May 1915. In the 8th Division war diary, a copy of the outline divisional operation order, dated 20 April 1915, is annotated by General Sir Douglas Haig, GOC First Army. Haig was in overall charge of the operations. His comments in the margins and at the end of the order, dated 23 April 1915, emphasise that, in his view, the paramount component of the plan should be the requirement for speed, that there should be no delay in pushing forward. He noted:

9 Rawlinson Diary entry, 14 March 1915, quoted in Stephen Badsey, 'Cavalry and the Breakthrough Doctrine', in Paddy Griffith, ed., *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (Ilford: Frank Cass, 1996), p. 150.

Aubers Ridge 9 May 1915: Men of 2nd Lincolnshire Regiment (25th Brigade) move forward through a crater occupied by British and German wounded. (Editor's collection)

> Having broken the enemy's front line system, we must try to gain a position beyond […] by one continuous sweeping movement. The shorter time taken over the operation, the fewer men will be lost. By advancing quickly we give the enemy no time to in which to recover from the effect of the bombardment …[10]

Haig was writing less than a month after the battle of Neuve Chapelle. It was believed that it was the failure to push through the follow up waves that had caused the assault eventually to fail. The plan, and comments, pre-supposed that the bombardment would be as successful as the initial bombardment at Neuve Chapelle the month before. It also depended on the supposition that the enemy had not learnt from their experiences, that they had not put improved physical defences and systems of fighting in place to counteract a repetition of the assault at Neuve Chapelle.

Haig's notes were at variance with Rawlinson's own comments in the IV Corps war diary, made thirteen days earlier on 10 April: "It will […] be better to wait a little so as to re-organise the infantry, re-establish communication between artillery and

10 The National Archives (Hereafter TNA) WO 95/1672, 8th Division War Diary, "General outline of proposed offensive operations, ref. G.203.K.".

infantry, and get the artillery on to the fresh targets. Therefore we must be prepared for operations lasting several days …"[11]

On the other hand, there were other communications in which IV Corps Headquarters appeared to hold a different viewpoint from that of its GOC. One set of notes circulated as a memorandum, issued under the signature of Brigadier-General A.G. Dallas, GSO1 IV Corps, to all commanders taking part in the proposed operations, also stated that it was believed operations would last some time. However, this was because the operation would achieve the long desired breakthrough: "1. The operations contemplated aim at gaining a decisive victory, and not merely a local success. The entire First Army will therefore be called upon to fight a violent and continuous action lasting probably for a considerable period of time …"[12] The memorandum appeared to agree with the views of General Haig that speed was of the essence. It stated that all specialist squads must know their part in the plan at each individual phase. Bombers, for example, must act offensively. It continued:

> Immediate advantage must be taken of every success gained and any position captured; any delay in pressing forward means heavy casualties subsequently and possible failure. Under existing conditions, which entail the assault of strong entrenchments over ground which affords little cover and few facilities for keeping direction, loss and confusion are inevitable during and after an attack. It is unlikely, therefore, that any particular body of infantry will be able to make more than a single concentrated effort in one day. Supports and reserves must consequently be kept close up, for the success depends on the energy of the attack being maintained and this can only be done by a wise use of supports by platoon, company, battalion and brigade commanders …[13]

The memorandum went on to state that the infantry must be ready to assault the enemy trenches with grenades as soon as the artillery stopped firing. To do so, the infantry must be moving forward across no-man's land while the guns were still firing.

The memorandum stated further that the assaulting troops must not stop if the troops on their flank are held up:

> The attack must be kept on the move at all costs. If a local check is allowed to become general, and the attack comes to a standstill, its vigour will be gone and will be difficult, if not impossible, to recover.

11 TNA: WO 95/708, IV Corps War Diary and Narrative of Operations: March – April 1915, note by Rawlinson, 10 April 1915.

12 TNA: WO 95/1672, 8th Division War Diary, IV Corps memorandum, 23 April 1915 (under the signature of Brigadier-General A.G. Dallas, GSO1 IV Corps).

13 Ibid.

> The essence of a successful attack is good platoon and company leading. Every platoon commander must move on as rapidly as possible without waiting for orders and without any fear of becoming isolated or cut off. It is the business of company and battalion commanders to fill any gaps that may occur by pushing up the supporting platoons and companies. These should not be used to reinforce directly troops that are temporarily held up, since overcrowding the firing line is apt to lead to heavy casualties and little else …[14]

The memorandum said any gained ground must be held as lightly as possible as the best way to secure it would be by continuing to move forward. It then discussed how to maintain contact, how officers should indicate the position reached by the forward line of troops. The artillery's forward observation officers did not need to be with the leading infantry but should use any vantage point to observe the ground over which the infantry were advancing. At the same time, if the observers became casualties their mission had failed. One method seen as beneficial was moving field guns, mortars and machine guns as far forward as possible, by hand if necessary, to attack defensive positions.

The order annotated by the Army commander was kept in the war diary of 8th Division. This suggests that the divisional commander and staff were very much aware of the philosophy behind General Haig's comments and that is what they attempted to put into action in their plan of attack. This view must have been reinforced by the additional memoranda from IV Corps stating that the aim of the battle was a decisive victory with an emphasis on the need to keep pushing forward, and to keep support up with the first assault.

The comments from General Haig, together with the memorandum, therefore appeared to have had the desired effect on 8th Division's planners. The memorandum was endorsed for communication to all commanders concerned. It can be seen as an attempt to address what had been thought to have failed at Neuve Chapelle with its emphasis on a quick follow up to the artillery, pushing reserves up quickly and with proposals on how to deal with delays and confusion.

The memorandum is remarkable in other ways. Its exhorts that the assault must be kept going, that platoon commanders must use their initiative and disregard the flanks, that the best way to defend ground is not to consolidate heavily but to keep moving forward and that failure must not be directly reinforced. These are similar to the infiltration tactics used by the German *Sturmabteilung* in 1917 and 1918 and the tactics of 'peaceful penetration' used by the Australians so successfully in the summer and autumn of 1918. The ideas put forward have even more parallels with the ideas of the French Army's Captain Laffargue, which he developed after his participation in the battles on Notre Dame de Lorette and Vimy Ridge in May 1915. The ideas propounded by Dallas, like Laffargue, recommend that the supports had to be as

14 Ibid.

close as possible to maintain the momentum.[15] However, Dallas' memorandum shows that there was a realisation in some quarters at least, that some form of embedded fire-support was also required. The problem was that the portable trench mortar was still in development and it was almost impossible to move sections of field guns or even single guns in the advance. Portable direct fire had to wait until the tank with its 6-pounders or until the open warfare of the 'Hundred Days' from August 1918, which allowed direct artillery support.

Differing viewpoints, however, put forward by others involved with the planning process concentrated on other lessons learned during the Battle of Neuve Chapelle. These argued against the use of surprise and a battle of movement. In early April 1915, Brigadier-General Holland, CRA 8th Division[16], also indicated that deliberate registration for the artillery was more desirable than surprise:

> I would also again draw attention to the vital necessity of having all the batteries in position at least 14 days before the attack takes place so as to enable deliberate registration to be undertaken, and during this period a wireless aeroplane should be at the disposal of the artillery daily for work …[17]

Holland, perhaps more in hope than any other frame of mind, also asked that the 4.7-inch battery be exchanged for the more modern, more accurate and more reliable battery of 60-pounder guns. Sir Martin Farndale commented on the condition of the artillery support:

> An analysis of the artillery shows severe defects. Of the field guns, eighty-four were obsolete 15-pounders; twenty of the field howitzers were of the obsolete 5-inch variety; only thirty three of the heavies were the effective 60-pounders. The twenty eight 4.7-inch guns were now so worn that the driving bands stripped off the shell at the muzzle resulting in extreme inaccuracy. The four 6-inch guns were also old and inaccurate.[18]

A fatal flaw in the artillery plan was that the amount of ammunition available was pitifully small. There could not be a repetition of the hurricane bombardment that stunned the Germans in the first phase of Neuve Chapelle, neither could there be a bombardment heavy enough to smash the German defences.[19]

15 For a discussion of Laffargue and the BEF's use of infiltration see, Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, pp. 58-64.
16 CRA: Commander Royal Artillery – commander of a division's integral artillery.
17 TNA: WO 95/1672, 8th Division War Diary, report, ref G 203 K, 8 April 1915.
18 Sir Martin Farndale, *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery: Western Front 1914–18* (London: The Royal Artillery Institute, 1986), pp. 103-4.
19 The situations at Aubers Ridge and Festubert were complicated by the requirement to send ammunition to the Dardanelles. This had delayed the former's attack from its

The British offensives at Aubers Ridge (9 May 1915) and Festubert (15 -27 May 1915) did not succeed. Aubers Ridge[20] was halted after one day due to heavy casualties and a complete failure to achieve any progress. Losses in 8th Division included one of the brigade commanders, Brigadier-General A. W. G. Lowry Cole, as well as many irreplaceable pre-war Regulars. Festubert, which did not involve 8th Division, appeared to be more successful, inflicting a degree of damage on the German defenders and gaining some ground. However, it too petered out due to the inability to reinforce success quickly enough and the problems of coordination.[21]

The Action at Bois Grenier

During the summer of 1915, Franco-British plans developed. The main body of the BEF was to fight at Loos, in the continuous conurbation of coal mines and pit villages, south of the La Bassee Canal. As the junior partner in a coalition, there was little choice.[22] A diversionary attack at Bois Grenier, at the northern extremity of Aubers Ridge, was to be carried out by 8th Division.

On 1 August 1915, 8th Division's commander changed. 'Joey' Davies went to command a corps at Gallipoli.[23] The new GOC was Henry Havelock Hudson. His

original date. See Ian Malcolm Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1988), p. 90.

20 Though the battle was officially known as 'Aubers Ridge', 8th Divisions' area was at Fromelles in the northern sector of the battle area. Therefore, in many accounts, including the division's history, it is referred to as 'Fromelles'.

21 See Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium 1915, Volume II: 1915: Battles of Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Loos* [henceforth *British Official History 1915, Vol. II*] (Reprint edition London: Battery Press and Imperial War Museum, 1995), pp. 77-9.

22 For further discussion about the nature of alliance politics and the pressure on the BEF to fight at Loos, see John Spencer's chapter elsewhere in this volume.

23 Francis John ('Joey') Davies (1864-1948): Worcestershire Militia; Grenadier Guards; GSO1 1 Division, 1908-9; GOC 1 (Guards) Brigade, 1909-10; BGGS Aldershot Command, 1910-13; Director Staff Duties, War Office, 1913-14; GOC 8th Division, 1914-15; GOC VIII Corps (Gallipoli), Aug 1915-Jan 1916; GOC IX Corps, Apr-Jun 1916; Military Secretary, War Office, 1916-1919; GOC Scottish Command 1919-23; retired 1923. He was also a senior freemason being Deputy Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge, the supreme governing body of the Order, as well as Provincial Grandmaster for the Province of Worcestershire from 1919 to 1948 Henry Havelock Hudson (1862-1944): Entered Army, 1881; Capt. 1892; Major, 1901; Lt-Col 1907; Col 1911; Maj. Gen., 1915; General, 1921; served Second Miranzai Expedition, 1901 (medal with clasp); NW Frontier, 1897 (medal and clasp); China, 1900 (despatches, medal, brevet of Major); Assistant QMG and Member of Executive Committee, Coronation Durbar, Delhi, 1903; Commandant Cavalry School, Saugor, 1912; Brig.-Gen. General Staff, Northern Army, 1912–14; BGGS Indian Corps, France and Flanders, 1914-15; GOC 8th Division, 1915-16; Adjutant-General, India, 1917–20; General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Army in India, 1920–24; ADC General to the King, 1922–24; retired,

British trenches: Bois Grenier August 1915. (NAM 2003-03-7-95)

background was staff work. Previously he had been Brigadier-General General Staff (GSO1), in effect the chief of staff, to the Indian Corps. His family background was in India and the Indian Army.

The tactical problem faced at Bois Grenier was simple. The British line ran in a deep bow-shaped re-entrant from Well Farm Salient on the right to Bridoux Salient on the left. The German line ran across the top of the re-entrant. Sited within the German front line were a series of strong points. These were the Corner Fort, almost directly opposite Well Farm Salient, then travelling up the line, the Angle, the Lozenge and then opposite Bridoux Salient, Bridoux Fort. The plan was to seize the German front line trenches and remove the threat from the re-entrant. Running across the chord of the re-entrant was a ditch. Dry in summer but wet in winter, it made a good 'jumping-off' point. The plan adopted was also simple in that all the assault units came from Stephens' 25th Brigade. 24th Brigade was in support, especially favouring the right flank. 23rd Brigade were in reserve.

Orders followed the prescribed pattern. Following verbal warning orders, general instructions were issued on 4 September 1915.[24] These dealt with assembly places, the need for careful but controlled reconnaissance, and the use of tram lines, bomb depots

1924; Member of Council of India, 1924–29; Colonel, Northamptonshire Regiment, 1925–31; Colonel, 19th Lancers IA, 1931–32.

24 TNA: WO 95/1673, 8th Division War Diary and Narrative of Operations: August – December 1915, "Instructions for offensive operations, ref G.404.K".

and traffic routes. Formal orders were issued on 6th September 1915.[25] 2nd Rifle Brigade would assault on the right around Corner Fort. 2nd Royal Berkshire would assault in the centre and 2nd Lincolnshires around Bridoux Fort. The fourth Regular battalion in the brigade, 1st Royal Irish Rifles was stacked behind 2nd Lincolnshires. The two attached Territorial battalions, 1/1st Londons (City of London Battalion, Royal Fusiliers) and 1/8th Middlesex, formed the brigade reserve, being used to man trenches and for carrying parties. The brigade's trench mortar battery was reinforced by 23rd Brigade's trench mortar battery.

24th Brigade was in support. 1st Sherwood Foresters was detached to the trench garrison, under the command of 25th Brigade. To the right of the main assault the trench garrison was formed into 'Lambert's Detachment', commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Lambert, CO 2nd East Lancashires.

As well as the main operational order, a separate appendix dealt with the artillery plan. Unlike the bombardments at Neuve Chapelle and Aubers Ridge, the bombardment would sacrifice surprise in order to smash the German defences. A four-day bombardment was envisaged. 8-inch howitzers, newly arrived in France, would be used to demolish the enemy strongpoints as well as engage enemy artillery. Further counter-battery fire would be carried out by an armoured train, 60-pounder guns and 4.7-inch guns. However, as it was probable that the heavy guns would be pulled out to go to the battle at Loos,[26] a novel expedient was proposed. Just prior to the assault, a mixture of smoke and gas would be released, over forty minutes in sequences of ten to six minutes or over sixteen minutes in sequences of six, two and eight minutes, depending on how much gas was available. The infantry were to assault five minutes afterwards. After the assault smoke would be used to cover those parts of the front still on the defensive. As there were insufficient trench mortars, catapults were to be used to launch much of the smoke, in the form of smoke candles.

When the assault commenced, a box barrage would be fired to halt enemy reinforcements.[27] Following from their successful use at Aubers Ridge, more 18-pounder guns were to be placed in the front line as 'parapet' guns. Three were to fire directly at three of the enemy strong points and another three were sited outside to open enfilade fire on enemy machine gun posts when these became known.

A further appendix was issued on 14 September 1915. This gave in detail the arrangements for exploiting the mines that were to be exploded at either end of the line of attack, a minute before the assault. Following their successful use at Fromelles, it was proposed that the RE would turn them into fire and communication trenches.[28]

On 21 September 1915, timings were issued:

25 Ibid., "8th Division operation order no. 62", 6 September 1915.
26 This was due to the overall shortage of heavy artillery. See *British Official History 1915, Vol. II*, pp. 116, 136 and 155.
27 TNA: WO 95/1673, 8th Division War Diary, "Appendix B, 8th Division Operation Order no. 62", 14 September 1915.
28 Ibid., "Appendix C, 8th Division Operation Order no. 62", 21 September 1915.

> 4.25 am beginning of bombardment, single guns, smoke, catapults and demonstrations on each flank of attack.
> 4.29 am Mines exploded in salients.
> 4.30 am Assault
> Single guns cease firing.
> Bombardment lifts from enemy's front trenches …[29]

The bombardment on the front line was to be very short. However, in order to deceive, a similar bombardment but of longer duration, was to take place at the same time the day before. As the operation was diversionary, 8th Division were to assault one hour before the main attack at Loos.

The action was the first time that Brigadier-General Reginald Byng Stephens, CO 25th Brigade, had commanded from the outset. On Friday 24 September 1915, he wrote to his wife:

> … tomorrow is the day. I've waited till today to tell you as it now cannot do any harm. I think we are in for a good show just here tho' the affair is almost universal. But (don't get swelled head) just here it is my plan and the Bn are going to do it and – as far as it goes- I think we shall succeed without great loss always supposing no-one behind issues any impossible orders about going on at once.[30]

On Sunday 26 September 1915, Stephens wrote another letter. The tone was completely different: "My darling, we have failed. Oh my dear such a bad day yesterday and I'm so disheartened about it all. It was the old story. We got into the trenches easily enough but failed to hold them effectively …"[31] British casualties numbered some 52 officers and 1,283 other ranks.[32] What had gone wrong?

Analysis

As at the battle of Neuve Chapelle, the assaulting troops gained the German trenches relatively easily. The attackers used skilful approach tactics, allowing them to spring

29 Ibid., "Continuation of 8th Div. Operation Order No. 62", 21 September 1915.
30 National Army Museum (NAM), Reginald Byng Stephens papers, letter, ref. 2000-12-501-351.
31 Ibid., letter, ref. 2000-12-501-352.
32 *British Official History 1915, Vol. II*, p. 263. However, the 8th Division history states that the casualties were 56 officers and 1,342 other ranks. See Boraston and Bax, *Eighth Division*, p. 295. The missing from the action are commemorated on the Ploegsteert Memorial, between Armentières, France and Menin, Belgium. Some 306 members of 8th Division units are listed as having no known grave and having died on 25 September 1915. See <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead.aspx?cpage=1&sort=name&order=asc> last accessed on 13/09/2014.

Bridoux Salient and German frontline from the air prior to the 25 September assault. (Author's collection)

upon the enemy as soon as the barrage lifted. The parapet guns had blown great gaps in the German breastworks. However, a stretch of some 200 yards around the Angle was not captured. The Germans reacted quickly and mounted incessant bombing counter-attacks. The "bomb battle" was relentless and the British bombers suffered at the hands of the Germans, who were equipped with large numbers of superior grenades. The bombers of 24th Brigade had to be sent up to reinforce those of the assaulting 25th Brigade. It was to no avail. At 1pm the Germans ejected the 2nd Lincolnshires from the Bridoux Fort, and the 2nd Royal Berkshires were hard pressed from both flanks. They clung on for another hour but were driven out and forced to withdraw about 2pm. All the pressure now fell on 2nd Rifle Brigade in Corner Fort. Although well dug in and protected by barbed wire, they occupied a deep salient in the enemy line that proved untenable. The order to withdraw came at 3.30 pm. By 4pm they had fallen back to the British front line in good order. That night, a trench was dug along the length of the ditch that had been used as the jumping-off point for the morning assault. 8th Division had to be satisfied with that gain.

Stephens wrote to his wife again two days afterwards:

> Everyone is very kind about our own show and I've had nothing but praise. But I am not satisfied. The plan was most carefully made and if I had to do it all again I can think of little to improve. The simple truth is that it became a bombing match and we were beaten at it … I am proud of some things. It was nothing like May 9th. We'd communication the whole show with the captured trench. There was no confusion or overcrowding in our own trenches. The wounded were almost all got away … We had 1100 casualties but … an enormous proportion are slight … I feel that it has shown the Brigade that they can do it without appalling loss even if they have to be pulled out again. I'm very proud of them …[33]

The failure to win the "bombing match" lay at the heart of the British defeat. James Jack, OC 'B' Company, 2nd Scottish Rifles, in Divisional reserve wrote in his diary: "The fuses of their bombs became damp and would not light … there were 12 patterns of hand bomb in British use and few had mastered completely the mechanism of all of them."[34] The divisional history commented further:

> great numbers [of bombs] were wasted because in the extreme excitement of action, the men forgot how the different types were to be treated. Apart from those spoiled by the rain, many bombs of the time fuse type, which required to be lighted, were thrown unlighted and so failed to explode …[35]

The division carried out detailed analysis of the action afterwards. The report of the divisional commander, Major-General Hudson, singled out the bombing problems but also said the mines did not create enough crater damage to be useful.[36] However, he believed the smoke on the flanks was useful.

Hudson also submitted a set of relevant points to III Corps.[37] It covered many topics. Regarding the bombers, the memo said there was no need for bombers to carry rifles, which impeded their movement, but recommended a cosh rather than a knife or dagger. Bombs needed standardising around the Mills and percussion grenades. Rifle grenades and a simple trench mortar were essential. The memo also believed the

33 NAM, Stephens papers, letter, ref. 1200-12-501-353.
34 John Terraine (ed.), *General Jack's Diary: The Trench Diary of Brigadier-General J. L. Jack* [henceforth *General Jack's Diary (2000)*], (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 113. For more on the problems of British grenade design, see John Sneddon Mason's chapter elsewhere in this volume.
35 Boraston & Bax, *Eighth Division*, p.51.
36 TNA: WO 95/1673, 8th Division War Diary, "Report on the Action of the 8th Division 25th September 1915", 29 September 1915.
37 TNA: WO 95/1725, 25th Infantry Brigade War Diary: September 1915–May 1916, copy of untitled memo on points re 8th Division operations of 25/09/1915, 9 October 1915.

duration of the bombardment needed varying and that where used the parapet guns were effective. A standing box barrage was useful to allow consolidation by the assault troops. The memo stated that the smoke was not suitable for use on the front that was assaulted. Due to its relative lightness and mobility, the Lewis gun should be preferred in the assault, but captured enemy weapons should be moved to the rear to prevent the enemy using them in the event of a successful counterattack. The memo stated that it was better to leave the Royal Engineers back until fighting had died down, and that in their absence the infantry should consolidate themselves. It further stated that the tramways were useful in evacuating casualties quickly. In conclusion, the memo stated that an unsuccessful attack would not be improved by having further troops brought into trenches choked with dead, wounded and leaderless men.

Stephens, GOC 25th Brigade, as the assault brigade commander, wrote his own set of notes as well as the official report.[38] The notes complemented the points made by the divisional commander but also included further suggestions. These included training officers and bombers in the use of German bombs so as to allow the use of captured grenades. The existing trench mortars needed improvement, as the catapults were more reliable for throwing bombs and smoke. Rifle grenades were very valuable in keeping enemy bombers at a distance. Stephens believed there should be two assault lines, not just one. The assault troops should risk casualties from our own artillery in order to close with the enemy. He also endorsed the point that the duration of the bombardment needed varying. He stated that more work had to be done by the artillery to damage the communication trenches. He thought parapet guns were valuable, stating that the assault failed where they were not used. Regarding casualty evacuation, Stephens suggested a hooked handle to drag or pull the waterproof ground sheets, which were very effective in carrying wounded in the trenches.

The CRA, Brigadier-General G.H.W. Nicholson, submitted a detailed eight-page report. It covered communications, ammunition supply, the arrival and preliminary work of the batteries, communication with the infantry, the parapet guns, use of smoke, the duration of the artillery bombardment, the assault bombardment and SOS signals.[39] This was nothing new. Although the infantry reports were more detailed than previously, the artillery had made detailed analysis before. For example, the CRA's reports and notes after Neuve Chapelle had run to some 11 pages. More importantly, both reports made by the CRA used the same headings. Thus, from early on, the artillery in particular was attempting to analyse its experiences systematically.[40]

Nicholson stated that the Divisional Reporting Centre, located on a previously used site, was too far to the right of the attacked front, but this was dealt with by using a

38 Ibid., "25th Infantry Brigade Notes on the operations, 25th September 1915", 3 October 1915.

39 TNA: WO 95/1683, 8th Division War Diary: November 1914–December 1915, "Report on Operations 8th Division and Attached Artillery – 25th September 1915".

40 Ibid. See "Report on Operations 8th Division Artillery 10th – 14th March, 1915" and "Remarks on Experiences of 10th – 13th March".

central exchange. This was more efficient at clearing messages and saved on telephone wire. He stated that there was a need for clear labelling of cable in trenches and that certain types of cable-support were too complicated. Buried D5 cable was found to be better that the ordinary D3. However, flag communication from the captured trenches was very poor. Problems with ammunition supply and the need for air observation caused problems in registration, as did the postponing of operations from 11 September 1915, which meant that a number of exposed batteries had to be moved or cease firing. The parapet guns were seen to perform well. Nicholson commented that the Angle, which did not receive such attentions, was the one strong point that was not captured. However, the parapet guns were not a universal success: the shock of the guns firing was such that many of the embrasures containing the weapons collapsed. Furthermore, one gun took an entire night and half of the next to remove while another took six hours and a detachment of fifty men to retrieve. As a result, he suggested that a lighter gun might be more usefully employed.

Nicholson was disappointed with the effectiveness of the smoke. He wrote: "Was it a success for the Infantry? For the gunners, on this occasion, it was not. It defeated observation for a considerable time until 11 am […] and combined with the fog …"[41]

Nicholson stated that the numbers of days of bombardment needed varying. Four days appeared now to be the custom and was therefore predictable. He was pleased with the aerial registration but stated that more was needed and not just for the heavy howitzers. The withdrawal of the heavy howitzers was a mistake, as it allowed the Germans to bring in reinforcements because the communication trenches were not sufficiently damaged, nor was enough damage done to the front line strongpoints. He was not convinced of the benefit of the box barrage but stated a short assault barrage allowed the infantry to move into the assault with fewer casualties.

The medical units also submitted their own reports on the operation.[42] Of the three divisional field ambulances, the bulk of the arrangements fell on 24th and 25th Field Ambulances. In order to deal with abdominal and chest wounds, 26th Field Ambulance set up a special ward at their main site at Bac Saint Maur, manned by a surgeon, a Captain Fraser, and four female staff from the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service. As the war progressed more and more complicated surgery was performed as far forward as possible in advance of the Casualty Clearing Stations (CCS) where most surgery was performed. In this instance, 8th Division's medical services were in the forefront of innovation designed to improve the chances of casualties surviving.[43]

The first wounded arrived at 24th Field Ambulance at 06.40 am and at 26th Field Ambulance at 06.55 am. Casualties then arrived in a steady stream. 24th Field

41 Ibid. "Report on Operations 8th Division and Attached Artillery – 25th September 1915".
42 TNA: WO 95/1687, Assistant Director Medical Services (ADMS) 8th Division War Diary, "Report on Action of Bois Grenier – Battle of Loos 25th September 1915".
43 See Geoffrey Noon, 'The Treatment of Casualties in the Great War' in Paddy Griffith (ed), *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), p.98.

Ambulance admitted until 09.00 pm, six officers, two hundred and twenty eight other ranks and five German prisoners of war. 26th Field Ambulance admitted to midnight nine officers, four hundred and thirty three other ranks and eighteen prisoners of war. Altogether, the 8th Division medical services admitted, between 06.00 am on 21 September to 09.00 am 28 September 1915, twenty-two officers and 819 other ranks from 8th Division. 69th Field Ambulance of 23rd Infantry Division also treated five officers and 227 other ranks from 8th Division. Apart from this mention in the statistics, there is no other mention in the report of any other activities carried out by 69th Field Ambulance. 23rd Division was one of the 'New Army' divisions and had arrived in France the previous month. Presumably its role was to support the operations of the other field ambulances in order to gain experience. What the medical services reported in some detail was the evacuation of the wounded. For example, the report detailed the problems caused by weather and enemy action:

> The weather was wet and the mud in the trenches greatly added to the difficulties of evacuation and the work of the bearer division was arduous […] Y Farm [also named 'Wye Farm', the site of a dressing station of 26 Field Ambulance] – Was under very heavy fire and could not be used …[44]

When a system worked it was commented on. For example, the benefits of using trams or light railways to evacuate casualties were noted. Another was using barges to evacuate the abdominal cases. Also not neglected were improvements that would increase benefits:

> Trams were very useful but would have been more easily worked if there had been transverse boards to give foot hold for those pushing them. M. Ambs. [Motor ambulances] should go as far forward as possible unless engines are used for the trams. Wooden rails and wheels give much friction during the wet weather – light steel rails would be better …[45]

Such detailed analysis was seen as important not just for the units already on the Western Front but above all for the units and formations of Kitchener's 'New Armies'. The knowledge gained from hard won experience was seen as essential for improving the effectiveness of the 'New Armies' with their 'dug-out' senior officers, inexperienced junior officers and their enthusiastic but inexpert non-commissioned officers and other ranks. Lessons learned, especially at the tactical and operational levels were quickly disseminated. For example, a 'sanitised' copy of Stephens' notes were sent to the GOCs-in-Chief of all Training Areas and Commands in the UK, the BEF, the New Armies and the Inspectors of all Arms by the War Office Director of Military

44 TNA: WO 95/1687, ADMS, 8th Division War Diary.
45 Ibid.

Training under cover of a letter dated 30 October 1915.[46] This was less than four weeks after Stephens had written the original.

In conclusion, the attack at Bois Grenier was a failure, much as Aubers Ridge had been and as Loos would prove to be. However, it was more than just a repetition of failure. It showed a continuation of the learning process. 8th Division was attempting to analyse what worked and what did not. The gunners saw the merits, or lack of them, in old methods as well as new ones. Direct fire was the oldest form of support given by the artillery. 8th Division's use of 'parapet guns' was a throwback to the tactics of the Peninsular War, Waterloo and the Indian Mutiny. The advent of accurate long-range rifles and, above all, the machine-gun, had meant that from the late nineteenth century, artillery could not be placed in range of the enemy's infantry. However, by its continual experiments with parapet guns using surprise to aid the initial assault, 8th Division's artillery commanders showed a willingness to experiment with what could be used. The difficulties that ensued with the emplacements of the parapet guns collapsing in action and the prodigious effort involved in embedding and removing the guns from the front line discouraged their use, and eventually the appearance of effective trench mortars removed the need for parapet guns. Direct fire was to return again in 1918 in the March Retreat and in the Hundred Days, when warfare again became more open and more mobile. The tank, one of the most important of the new weapon systems introduced in the war, was nothing if not an attempt to return to direct fire but with more mobility and protection.

One other lesson also seemed to be more apparent than ever. Brigadier-General Reginald Byng Stephens wrote to his wife: "I believe now that all these side shows are wrong. The only thing that can succeed is a very big show […] we ought to have been added to the one big show in the south."[47] For 8th Division, its next battle was to be a very big show and it was to take place further to the south, beyond Loos. It was to be in the area of the River Somme on 1st July 1916, between Pozieres and Ovillers.

46 See copy in TNA: WO 95/1725, 25th Infantry Brigade War Diary: September 1915–May 1916, letter reference 'M.T.2', 30 October 1915.

47 NAM: Stephens Papers, letter, ref. 2000-12-501-356.

15

Gas, Grenades and Grievances: The Attack on the Hohenzollern Redoubt by 46th (North Midland) Division, 13 October 1915

Michael Woods

Introduction

The formidable Hohenzollern Redoubt, located in the northern French coalfields around Loos-en-Gohelle, was a key German strongpoint for defence of the Loos sector. The redoubt had been an initial objective of the six division assault at the Battle of Loos (25-26 September 1915), and had been the scene of relentless fighting before the Germans regained full control of the position in early October. For reasons that remain controversial, it was decided that a second attack would be made against the position in October. The 46th (North Midland) Division was chosen for this unenviable task. The attack was launched on 13 October 1915 and, despite the best efforts of officers and men, it ended in a bloody repulse.

This attack was described by the Official Historian James Edmonds as having "brought nothing but the useless slaughter of infantry" and receives scant mention in the secondary literature concerning Loos.[1] The *Official History* dedicates 13 pages to the attack, despite allocating 233 pages to the attacks in September.[2] The only serious review of the action in recent times, as part of a wider study of the Battle of Loos, was conducted by Nick Lloyd.[3] Whilst there is no doubt that the number of casualties sustained in the attack was extraordinarily high,[4] Edmonds's blunt assessment belies the complexity of the operation. The attack was launched in accordance with

1 G. Corrigan, *Loos 1915: The Unwanted Battle,* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006), P. Warner, *The Battle of Loos* (London: P. Kimber & Co, 1976).
2 Sir J.E. Edmonds (Ed.), *History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium, 1915, Vol. 2 Battles of Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Loos* (London: Macmillan, 1928). [Hereafter *Official History*].
3 N. Lloyd, *Loos 1915,* (Stroud: The History Press, 2008), pp. 189-212.
4 Casualty figures are discussed below.

the demands of coalition warfare and there was a genuine attempt at innovation in the operational and tactical methods employed in the battle. However, as this chapter will reveal, the innovations ultimately proved unhelpful or even harmful, with tragic consequences. Nevertheless, the attack on the Hohenzollern Redoubt merits study. An examination of the planning, execution and post-battle assessment of the action reveals much about the British Expeditionary Force (BEF)'s abilities, limitations and learning processes in 1915.

This chapter offers a new study of this subsidiary action and will examine the battle on three levels. Firstly, it is necessary to briefly outline the political and strategic context that framed the attack. Secondly, the planning process at army, corps and divisional level will be examined. Finally, the chapter will study the attack in detail and illustrate how and why it failed, as well as discussing the lessons that emerged from the bitter experience.

Political Context

At first glance, it seems inexplicable that an inexperienced division of infantry was ordered to attack a heavily fortified position when a previous, much stronger attack had failed. However, when the context of the Anglo-French coalition is examined it becomes apparent that Field Marshal Sir John French, Commander in Chief of the BEF, was under intense pressure from his French counterpart, Chief of General Staff Joseph Joffre, to continue with offensive action in the area.

The British *Official History* explains how the capture of Vimy Ridge and its commanding position would enable the French Tenth Army "to deliver an attack with its full weight eastwards from about Arras and Lens into and across the plain of Douai".[5] When Joffre launched his simultaneous Artois and Champagne offensives, the aim was to effectively trap the German Seventh, First and Second Armies in the Noyon Salient and to cut off any re-enforcement or escape via the Meziere-Hirson railway. The French capture and consolidation of Vimy Ridge relied on the British securing the Douai plain, thus protecting their northern flank. Without this the French plan was doomed to failure. Therefore, the demands of coalition warfare meant that the BEF had to maintain the offensive in the Loos area, even after the attack on 25-26 September had failed to achieve its objectives, as the French required the British to maintain the pressure whilst they made new efforts to capture Vimy Ridge.

However, whilst the French were pressing Sir John to attack, the British government, and particularly Secretary of State for War Lord Kitchener, were cautious about committing the BEF to further costly offensives. Kitchener was focussed on a global war and a 'long game' to achieve victory. In 1915 he was preoccupied with trying to keep Russia in the war and conducting offensives against other enemies such as the Ottoman Empire. As the most recent biographer of Kitchener, George Cassar states:

5 Edmonds, *Official History, 1915, Vol. 2,* p. 134.

"Kitchener believed Britain's interest lay in destroying German militarism, not necessarily Germany itself. He believed that a balance of power in post-war Europe was contingent on a strong rather than a crippled, Germany".[6]

Kitchener's lack of support for further major offensives on the Western Front is evidenced by the fact that it was he who provided the 46th (North Midland) Division in March 1915, in preparation for an Anglo-French offensive, when a Regular unit was originally requested. Cassar states: "Sir John French considered the North Midland Territorial Division … an inadequate substitute for the crack Twenty-ninth Division".[7] Kitchener was holding back the 29th Division for the Dardanelles campaign. Thus by sending a Territorial division, originally earmarked for home service, this was a clear message to Sir John that any further large-scale offensives were off the agenda for the time being. Yet, as will be seen, the North Midlanders were to be ordered to attack none the less.

However it was not Kitchener that endured the day to day dealings with Joffre, General Ferdinand Foch and individual French Army Commanders such as General Victor D'Urbal, (Tenth Army), who were continually exerting pressure on the BEF to keep on the offensive in the Loos area. That task befell Sir John and his First Army Commander, General Sir Douglas Haig. As an incentive for fresh British attacks, D'Urbal agreed to take over lines held by the British IV Corps, (particularly the area held by 47th Division), on 1 October 1915. At the same time, D'Urbal wrote to Haig directly, suggesting that his own artillery, now situated close to Hill 70, would assist any attack on the Fosse 8 and Bois Hugo areas by "distracting" German forces. This, he argued, coupled with the British artillery, would ensure success in any forthcoming attack.[8]

Thus, Sir John was faced with conflicting demands from his political masters in Whitehall and his French allies in the field. With the BEF as a distinctly junior partner in a bloody coalition war, it was no easy matter to decline the insistent requests of the French. Chief of Staff Sir William Robertson summed up the problems in a letter to Edmonds after the war:

> Sir John never believed in the optimistic view held by the French; he did not want to fight extensively in the summer of 1915 until he had better trained troops and more ammunition; but it was his duty to co-operate with the French … I wonder if you have made sufficient allowance for Sir John's difficulty?[9]

This chapter will show that the subsequent attack at Loos did not meet the strategic aims of the BEF at that time; however it went some way to appeasing Joffre. Sir John

6 G.H. Cassar, *Kitchener's War,* (Washington DC: Brasseys, 2004), p. 148.
7 Ibid., p. 165.
8 G. Sheffield and J. Bourne (eds.) *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918,* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005), 29 September 1915, p. 159.
9 The National Archives [TNA]: CAB 45/121, Sir William Robertson, to Edmonds, 10 August 1926.

French had at his disposal a fresh division that was keen to prove its worth. There was an element of irony in the choice of division for the renewed attack. The 46th (North Midland) Division was a Territorial division, originally constituted for home defence. It would now be thrown into a bloody battle in a foreign land to preserve Anglo-French relations.

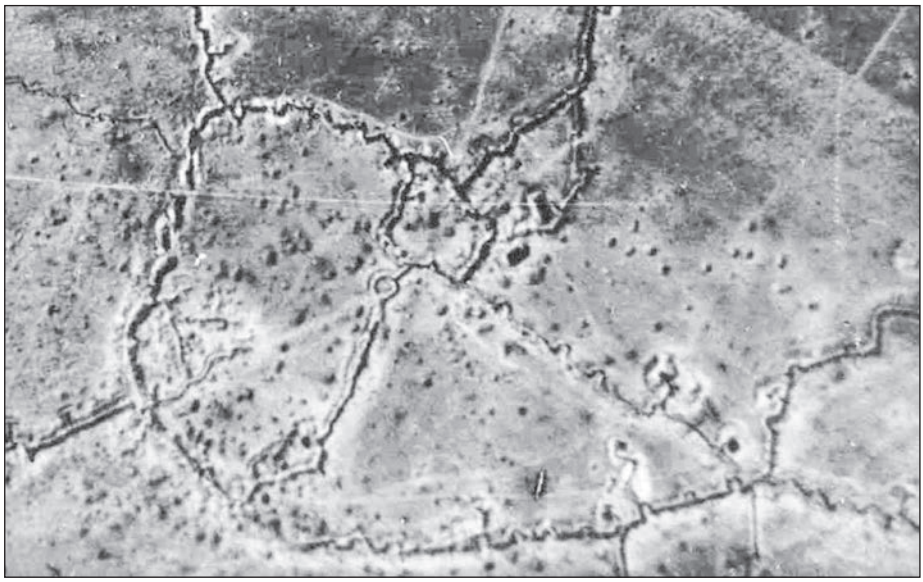
The 46th (North Midland) Division

The 46th was the first complete Territorial division to join the British Expeditionary Force in France. Assigned to Second Army, the division landed at Boulogne on 1 March 1915 and was made up of three infantry brigades, 137th, 138th and 139th, all from the north Midland area. The only exception to this was their pioneer battalion, the 1st Monmouthshire Regiment, which joined them in July, after several weeks of prevaricating by II Corps Headquarters.[10]

The division's commander was Major-General, the Honourable, Edward Montagu Stuart-Wortley. He was 57 years of age and had spent his early career in India and later fought in Sudan against the Dervishes, winning the D.S.O. in 1897. During the Second Boer War he commanded the 10th King's Royal Rifle Corps. He had semi-retired from his last post as G.O.C. 10th Brigade with promotion to Major-General, but was called back to full duties at the outbreak of war. Stuart-Wortley had a reputation as an excellent trainer of troops.[11] However, he would ultimately be made a scapegoat for 46th Division's perceived poor performance during the attack at the Hohenzollern Redoubt and again at Gommecourt on the first day of the Battle of the Somme (1 July 1916). His personal file is full of correspondence in which he attempted to clear his name.[12] These charges are largely unfair, for as this chapter reveals, there is no evidence to suggest Stuart-Wortley lacked competence or failed in his duties at the Hohenzollern attack.

Following its arrival in France, the division's initial months were spent learning the art of trench-holding under the tutelage of the 1st Somerset Light Infantry and 1st London Rifle Brigade, in the area of Ploegsteert Wood, Belgium, before holding its own sections of front line at Kemmel. During the next few months, the division undertook similar trench-holding duties in the areas of Hill 60 and Zillebeke. This was a quiet time for the division with little of note occuring, except for the unfortunate loss of the battalion commander of 1/4th Lincolnshire Regiment, Lieutentant Colonel J.W. Jessop to shellfire on 4 June 1915.[13] It appears that the division performed its defensive duties efficiently and effectively. Indeed Stuart-Wortley was later to write

10 K. Mitchinson, *Pioneer Battalions in the Great War,* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997), pp. 60-61.
11 Obituary: Edward Montagu Stuart-Wortley, *The Times*, 20 March, 1934.
12 TNA: WO138/29, Personal File of Major General Hon E.J. Montagu Stuart-Wortley.
13 TNA: WO95/26991, Battalion Diary, 1/4th Lincolnshire Regiment.



Hohenzollern Redoubt from the air. (Editor's collection)

of this period that his formation received "great praise from Generals Plumer, Allenby and Fergusson",[14] although this praise does not appear to be documented elsewhere.

On 1 October 1915, 46th Division was ordered south to join XI Corps, part of Haig's First Army. It was XI Corps that had been selected to organise the renewed attack in the Loos area. The corps commander, Lieutenant-General Sir Richard Haking, intended to assault the heavily defended Hohenzollern Redoubt and an adjacent mine pit-head, known as Fosse 8. The crack Guards Division had originally been earmarked for this task, but had not recovered sufficiently from its heavy casualties at the Battle of Loos. Instead, 46th Division was selected to spearhead the attack; Stuart-Wortley believed that his men had been personally chosen for this difficult challenge.[15]

The Planning of the Attack

The plan of attack for XI Corps was first discussed at a conference at First Army Headquarters on 6 October 1915. The broad outline was that the main infantry attack would be led by the 46th Division and would be supported by two brigades of 12th

14 TNA: WO138/29, Personal File of Major General Hon E.J. Montagu Stuart-Wortley, Stuart-Wortley to Churchill, 4 May, 1920.
15 Ibid.

Division to the south and some battalions of I and IV Corps on the wider flanks, acting primarily as diversionary forces.[16] The minutes of the debate reveal the best and worst of British command at this stage of the war. On a positive note, Haking appeared cautious in relation to the setting of ambitious objectives for the attack. This probably reflected the bitter experience of early battles of 1915, and was more in line with a 'step by step' approach which was later to become one of the features of the so-called learning curve of the BEF, and which was frequently promoted by other commanders such as General Sir Henry Rawlinson.[17] Indeed, when the conversation turned to the possibility of moving on to further objectives such as Cite St. Elie, once the initial objectives of Fosse 8 and The Quarries were captured, Haking spoke against the idea. The notes of the conference state: "General Haking was personally in favour of not moving further forward than the Fosse and the Quarries as the capture of Cite St. Elie would be a big operation".[18] The notes suggests that Haking had held discussions with Lieutenant-General Sir Hubert Gough and Rawlinson about the earlier attacks at Loos and was attempting to learn from their mistakes, by not seeking the over-ambitious 'breakthrough.'

In discussing the timing of the attack, Haking showed a real attempt at innovation. He stated that he wanted the attack to commence late in the afternoon, despite Haig asserting that an early morning attack would be most suitable for the release of gas. Haking stated that "his main object was to consolidate his position gained and the best time to do this would be at night".[19] Bitter experience at the Battle of Loos had taught the British that although it was possible to break into German trench systems, it was hard for disorganised and bloodied attackers to hold the ground in the face of the inevitable enemy counter-attack. However, Haking's plan for an afternoon advance meant that the Germans would lack sufficient daylight to mount a serious counter-attack and would instead be forced to launch an assault against a consolidated British position at first light on the next day. Hence a time of between 2pm to 3pm was suggested, giving one or two hours of daylight to facilitate the capture of ground, prior to its fortification. The plan demonstrated a willingness to learn from the mistakes of the earlier attacks and to try new methods. Unfortunately, for reasons that will become apparent, the decision would ultimately prove disastrous.

However, although Haking was cautious about the ability of his infantry to resist German counter-attacks, he was wildly over-optimistic in his expectations of his supporting artillery. It is this optimism that appears to be the greatest flaw throughout First Army in this period. In reply to a question from Haig as to whether XI Corps would have sufficient artillery to support the attack, Haking replied that he "was quite

16 TNA: WO195/59, XI Corps 'Scheme for the Attack', 6 October 1915.
17 R. Prior and T. Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Command of Sir Henry Rawlinson*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
18 TNA: WO195/59, 'Notes of Conference Held at First Army Headquarters at Hinges, 6pm on 6th October, 1915'.
19 Ibid.

satisfied that he had sufficient," but in relation to the length of the bombardment, he had "not yet worked out the details of the scheme."[20] This cannot have given infantry commanders much reassurance. If the daylight assault was to succeed at breaking in to the German line it was essential that the defences were thoroughly suppressed by artillery fire. Without this perquisite the potential advantage of an afternoon attack, namely the prevention of an immediate German counterstroke, would be rendered moot as the advancing infantry would be unable to capture their objectives, let alone defend them.

The attack was initially scheduled for 10 October, but three factors were to cause Haking to ask for a delay until 12 or 13 October. Firstly, there were German counter-attacks on 7 and 8 October; secondly the 46th Division arrived unexpectedly late to the area, a delay caused and exacerbated by poor communication trenches at that time; and finally extra time was needed to get all the gas cylinders to be used in the attack safely into their front-line emplacements.[21]

Following the First Army Conference of 6 October, and in line with *Field Service Regulations (Part II)*, [FSR], Stuart-Wortley was asked to design his own divisional plan of attack to fit within First Army's conceptual framework. Stuart-Wortley's plan, submitted on 7 October, proved that he was prepared to disagree with his corps commander. In relation to the northern side of the attack and its objectives, he requested that they were changed to some enemy trenches closer to his own front line and not the ones known as 'the Corons,' (beside small miners' houses), which were 50 to 100 metres further away. He stated:

> The above line is not quite so far forward as that outlined by the Corps Commander at yesterday's conference, but after careful consideration I have come to the conclusion that the objective I propose would be more easily held when captured, and, as far as I can judge, would give us all we want.[22]

Stuart-Wortley's willingness to argue in favour of a limited, methodical approach to the attack should be commended, especially given the paucity of resources available for the operation. However, his cautious assessment did not find favour with his superiors. Indeed, Stuart-Wortley was later to complain to the James Edmonds:

> I went over the ground with Lord Cavan, and with his knowledge and experience of it, my appreciation of it was that we should take trench by trench and not rush on to Fosse 8. In this I was over-ruled and was told by both the corps commander and by the army commander that as my attack would be covered

20 TNA: WO159/59, 'Notes of Conference Held at First Army Headquarters'.
21 TNA: WO195/59, Haking to Haig, (handwritten and typed note), 7 October 1915.
22 TNA: WO95/2662, 'Operational Order, 46th (North Midland) Division Attack, 13th October 1915'.

> by the fire of over 400 guns, the division would probably reach Fosse 8 without firing a shot![23]

This was not mere post-war self-justification. Available contemporary evidence reveals that Stuart-Wortley was an open minded commander keen to learn and develop. His papers contain notes made following a meeting on 6 October with Lieutenant Colonel S.E. Holland, Chief of Staff for 9th (Scottish) Division and Captain J.S. Drew of the Cameron Highlanders.[24] Both of these men had been in action on 25 September and their units had been involved in the battle for Fosse 8. Stuart-Wortley's notes list twenty two tactical points that emerged from the meeting, all of which provide critical and useful information. These include places that needed special attention, such as: "the points which gave us the most trouble," "the most likely direction for a counter attack", "a machine gun must be placed near …"[25] They give detailed descriptions of the trenches to be taken, including the geology of the ground. For example they stated that: "one pick to three shovels" should be taken to consolidate captured positions.[26] The following day, 7 October, Stuart-Wortley received another visitor, Lieutenant Colonel Gathorne-Hardy of 7th Division.[27] Yet more useful advice was passed on; Hardy gave instructions on how to block enemy trenches[28] and stressed that: "it is important that our bombers should be taught the use of the German bombs, as there are usually large numbers to be found".[29] He also suggested the value of what would later be called 'moppers-up.' Hardy stated: "It is the greatest importance to have supporting lines specially detailed to bomb out dug outs and secure prisoners".[30] After the preceding two days of discussions with his visitors, on 8 October Stuart-Wortley instructed as many of his officers as possible to inspect the trenches they were about to take over in order to familiarise themselves with the terrain.

Stuart-Wortley's dedicated approach demonstrated a willingness to learn from past experience that does him credit and provides further refutation of the concept of the BEF as 'lions led by donkeys'. However, whilst 46th Division worked hard to learn and adapt, the same cannot be said of XI Corps, where, as will be seen, the planning to get the troops in place and ready for action were to demonstrate a dispiriting failure to learn from earlier lessons.

23 TNA: CAB45/121, Stuart-Wortley to Edmonds, 23 June 1926.
24 TNA: WO95/2662, 'Notes Made at a Visit of Lt. Col. Holland, G.S.O. 1, 9th Division and Captain Drew, Cameron Highlanders to Divisional Headquarters, 6th October, 1915'.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 TNA: WO95/2662, 'Notes Made at a Meeting of Lt. Col. Gathorne-Hardy G.S.O.1, 7th. Division at Divisional Headquarters, 7/10/15'.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.

Final Preparations

The initial attack was to be undertaken by two battalions of 137th Brigade (5th South Staffords and 6th North Staffords) and two of 138th Brigade (4th Leicesters and 5th Lincolns), the four battalions advancing side by side. The remaining battalions formed the second wave whilst 139th Brigade remained in support.[31] These units had a few days to train for the task ahead of them in line with the advice given to Stuart-Wortley from the visitors from 7th Division and 9th Division.[32]

Unfortunately, preparations for the attack were undermined by the difficulties faced with deployment. The division had already experienced problems in the build-up, as various elements had struggled to move through overcrowded communication trenches which were still damaged from earlier fighting. Indeed, the trenches were so full that the men of the division had no space to rest as they waited for zero hour. Captain Hills of 5th Leicestershire Regiment described the last hours following a march from Vermelles:

> The next eight hours were bad, for it took eight hours to reach our assembly position, the third line – eight hours standing in hopelessly congested communication trenches waiting to go forward. For men heavily laden – each carried six sandbags and every third man a shovel – this delay was very tiring, for it meant continuous standing with no room to rest, and resulted in our arriving in the line tired out, to find it was already time to have breakfast.[33]

This was hardly ideal preparation for the assault and suggests poor staff work at corps level. Clearly not enough time had been spent on repairing and preparing these vital links to the front line. This echoes similar complaints made by 21st and 24th Divisions in the attack on 26 September. It seems that the corps had learned nothing from this debacle. Indeed, it raises questions regarding not only the competence but also the integrity of Haking, XI Corps's commander, who on that occasion pushed the blame onto the troops themselves, putting the fault down to "poor march discipline".[34] This was later vehemently denied by Major-General Forestier-Walker, 21st Division's commander.[35] Forestier-Walker's view is supported by other first-hand evidence such as that of Lieutenant Colonel Vincent, who stated: "[we] had to march several miles along roads already very congested with traffic, transport, ammunition, ambulances

31 TNA: WO95/2662, 'Operational Order, 46th (North Midland) Division Attack, 13th October, 1915'.
32 'Notes Made at a Visit of Lt. Col. Holland' and Captain Dean and 'Notes Made at a Meeting of Lt. Col. Gathorne-Hardy'.
33 J.D. Hills, *The Fifth Leicestershire,* (Loughborough: Echo Press, 1919), pp. 75-76.
34 M. Senior, *Haking: A Dutiful Soldier, Lt General Sir Richard Haking XI Corps Commander 1915-18, A Study in Corps Command,* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2012), p. 67.
35 TNA: CAB45/120, Forestier-Walker to Edmonds.

and walking wounded. To us this seemed evidence of the crass stupidity and incompetence of higher authority".[36] The final verdict can be taken from Haking's most recent biographer who states: "His mixed tactical and administrative performance – was not up to the standards that might reasonably be expected of a professional and high ranking soldier".[37] The tiring deployment of 46th Division did not augur well for the coming offensive.

There was another problem that confronted the division upon arrival. Recently acquired intelligence sounded a note of caution regarding the attack. It had been discovered that amongst the German dead found near the Hohenzollern Redoubt in the preceding days were men from the 13th Regiment. These troops were previously believed to be in the area to the north of the La Bassee Canal and their unexpected presence on the front indicated that the Hohenzollern Redoubt had been recently reinforced.[38]

Major-General Edward James Montagu Stuart-Wortley GOC 46th (North Midland) Division. (Editor's collection)

Officers at the front were experiencing difficulties of their own. Lieutenant Colonel G. J. Worthington, (1/5th North Staffords), was later to complain about the lack of high quality maps supplied for the Hohenzollern action. In relation to those given to junior officers he stated: "In many respects [the maps] were incomplete, inaccurate and the trenches themselves had been considerably damaged in recent fighting".[39] Given that the use of smoke and gas were the main components for the attack, those in the vanguard would have been wholly reliant on first rate maps to guide them. On a similar theme, the Battalion Diary of the 1/5th Lincolnshire Regiment noted the unhelpful nature of a reconnaissance visit to the front line on 8 October. It states: "No guides appeared to be available and the occupants of the trenches, including officers,

36 Letter from Lt. Col. S. Vincent, then a Corporal in 24th Divisional Cycling Company, quoted in Warner, *The Battle of Loos,* p. 202.
37 Senior, *Haking*, p. 69.
38 TNA: WO157/3, 'GHQ Intelligence Summary, 11 October 1915'.
39 Imperial War Museum [IWM]: 79/5/1 'Attack by 46th Division Oct 13th 1915', Report by Lt. Col. Worthington, (1/5th North Staffords).

seemed to know very little about them … Very little was gleaned from the visit, except what could be seen from periscopes".[40]

Haking and XI Corps staff must bear a heavy responsibility for this poor state of affairs. It was the responsibility of the corps to make the necessary arrangements for a newly arriving division, as well as providing appropriate intelligence, maps and resources.[41] The failure to do so suggests that Haking and his staff had learned nothing from the mistakes made at the Battle of Loos, whilst Haking's subsequent refusal to accept even a modicum of the blame sheds an unfavourable light upon his character. The cost of these errors would be paid in blood by 46th Division.

Artillery Support

First Army's battles throughout 1915 had emphasised the crucial role of artillery. Unfortunately, the fire support available for 46th Division was distinctly unimpressive. There were to be three groups of heavy artillery totalling 78 guns. These were an assortment of heavy guns and howitzers, including eight 6-inch howitzers, two 15-inch howitzers and twenty seven 60-pounders. The plan also included field artillery from 2nd, 7th, 29th and Guards Divisions to support the attack, which consisted of 18-pounders and 4.5-inch field howitzers. This amounted to 227 guns in total. The field artillery from both the 12th and 46th Divisions was the next 'layer' of the planned bombardment. The exact number of those guns is not listed, but Simon Peaple has calculated the figure to be 140 guns arranged in twenty-five batteries.[42] This gave a final total of 445 guns to support the attack and gives some credence to Haig's diary entry of 6 October 1915: "every available gun will be placed under Haking's orders for the attack on Fosse 8 and the Quarries".[43]

However, there were serious weaknesses with the artillery support for the attack. Half of 46th Division's own guns were obsolete 15-pounders of Boer War vintage.[44] These weapons were aged, inaccurate and comparatively short ranged. Their performance at the coming battle was so poor that they were subsequently withdrawn from service. Furthermore, although the number of guns seemed formidable, artillery effectiveness was proportional to the density of fire it could pour onto a particular area of trench. The allocated front for 46th Division was 3,680 yards. That allocated to 12th Division amounted to 1,800 yards; thus the total front being attacked on 13 October amounted to 5,480 (linear) yards of trench.[45] This gives a figure of one

40 TNA: WO95/2691, War Diary of 1/5th Lincs Regiment, 8 October 1915.
41 A. Simpson, 'British Corps Command on the Western Front,' in G. Sheffield and D. Todman, (eds.), *Command and Control on the Western Front*, (Stroud: Spellmount, 2004).
42 S. Peaple, 'The 46th (North Midland) Division T.F. On the Western Front, 1915-1918', Unpublished Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2003, p. 68.
43 TNA: WO25, Haig Diary.
44 Peaple, 'The 46th (North Midland) Division T.F.', p.68.
45 Ibid.

gun to every 12.31 yards of trench. Work by Prior and Wilson has shown that this figure is precisely half of the concentration used against a far weaker position at Neuve Chapelle in March, although that bombardment lasted only 35 minutes, compared to the two hours proposed for the attack in October.[46]

Lacking sufficient concentration of fire, the artillery would require pinpoint accuracy to inflict sufficient damage on the German defences. But the experiences of the Battle of Loos suggested that this was an unrealistic goal: indeed, the latter battle had raised searching questions about the overall effectiveness of the BEF's artillery. Critical analysis by artillery officers can be found in the post-War correspondence with the Official Historian about the Loos offensives and highlight some of the problems they faced. Major Bunn, who commanded an artillery brigade during the fighting of September and October 1915, described the artillery plans for these battles as: "too deliberate, scattered and drawn out for the amount of ammunition available".[47] He went on to say: "many air observers, and even some experienced gunners were too optimistic".[48] Further criticism came from Lt. Colonel Warren, who had commanded a 6-inch howitzer battery during the Battle of Loos. He wrote: "other targets were a 77[mm] battery … but the few rounds we put in by guess work were quite futile; fleeting shots at small bodies of Germans passing northwards".[49]

A further limitation at Loos was the fact that the BEF was still in the middle of 'the Shell Crisis' and there was a shortage of shells, particularly those containing high explosive. The bombardment as a whole was limited and did not compare to those of later battles in the following years.[50] One authority has since pointed to an added problem of defective ammunition within the already limited supply of shells at this time: "dud shells, it should be noted, littered the Loos battlefield".[51] Ammunition faults were still unresolved by October.

As a result of these problems the attack at the Hohenzollern Redoubt was preceded by three days of a 'softer' artillery bombardment, in which: "Divisional artillery was devoted to wire cutting while the heavy artillery concentrated on the enemy trenches and the strong points housing machine guns".[52]

The infantry attack began at noon following a final two hours of intense bombardment of the enemy trenches. The intensity of this latter stage of the bombardment received mixed reviews from observers. This highlights the complexities of seeking honest reflections from those that had the benefit of hindsight. For example, post-war

46 Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front,* p. 112.
47 TNA: CAB45/120, Major Bunn, 59 Siege Battery, RGA to Edmonds, 12 October 1927.
48 Ibid.
49 TNA: CAB45/12, Lt. Col. Warren, Lahore Division to Edmonds, 21 May 1926.
50 G. Sheffield, *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army,* (London: Aurum, 2011), pp. 113-122.
51 S. Bidwell and D. Graham, *Fire-Power: The British Army Weapons & Theories of War 1904-1945* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2004 [1982]), p. 79.
52 Senior, *Haking,* p. 60.

comments from Captain Hills of 5th Leicestershire Regiment stated: "Compared with the bombardments of the Somme and the later battles, our bombardment was small, but it seemed to us at the time terrific".[53] Conversely, Captain Milne of 4th Leicestershire Regiment recalled:

> At noon our guns began to bombard, but the bombardment was disappointing. Was this the biggest bombardment of the war? Surely not? The transport officers of the 4th and 5th Leicesters sitting together in Vermelles thought the guns were giving short measure. Surely this was not what had been promised? The men in the trenches thought the same.[54]

It is difficult to objectively assess the effectiveness of the pre-attack bombardment and results varied across the front. For example, C Battery, 91st Brigade, Royal Field Artillery, (RFA), managed to fire a concentrated barrage of 100 high explosive, [HE], rounds, resulting in "stakes and wire being blown into the air" and "a clear space of between 40 and 50 yards in the wire".[55] The same battery then dropped more HE shells on wire that had previously been fired on with shrapnel shell only. This "left a clear gap of between 60 and 70 yards".[56] But by contrast the nearby gunners of 64th RFA and D Battery, 91st, Brigade RFA reported there were "no clear lanes" due to the majority of their shells being shrapnel.[57] Post-war regimental histories confirm the existence of some areas of unbroken wire, but it should be noted that there is little in the way of complaint about infantry being trapped or held up by these defences compared to the earlier attack by 9th (Scottish) Division on 25 September. Indeed, the history of the Lincolnshire Regiment states: "All accounts agree that the 4th Leicesters and 1/5th Lincolnshire advanced with great gallantry. The wire in front of the Redoubt had been well cut by the artillery, and both battalions swept over the west face of the Redoubt with but few casualties".[58] The German arrangement of their barbed wire propped on wooden stakes, often in an 'X' shape, proved vulnerable to destruction. It is no coincidence that the Germans moved over to metal supports in the months after this attack. Thus in terms of wire cutting, it seems the BEF's artillery was reasonably successful. But in relation to neutralising enemy machine guns, strong points and artillery it was much less so.

53 Hills, *Fifth Leicestershire,* p. 76.
54 J. Milne, *Footprints of the 1/4 Leicestershire Regiment,*(Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, 2002 [1935]), p. 54.
55 TNA: WO95/159, 'Report on Wire Cutting carried out by 20th Divisional Artillery, 13/10/15'.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 C. R. Simpson, *History of the Lincolnshire Regiment,* (Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, 2001[1931]), p. 127.

Gas & Smoke

In addition to the artillery preparations, the British intended to deploy a wildcard weapon in support of the attack. Despite its mixed performance at the Battle of Loos, the plan for the assault on the Hohenzollern Redoubt incorporated a further use of poison gas and smoke.

Haking had advocated the use of gas for the assault. Haig had pressed his subordinate to attack on 10 October without gas deployment, but Haking replied that without the weapon the advance would have: "A fair chance of success against Fosse 8 etc., but that it would have a much better chance of success if it was delayed until 13th by which date the necessary gas cylinders would be put into the trenches and the arrangements made by the Guards and 46th Divisions completed without hurry".[59] That Haking got his way not only shows that Haig was starting to trust his Corps commanders and that this level of command was not simply a 'post-box' for orders delivered from General Headquarters,[60] but also that his initial proposal for an early attack was simply impossible.

Haking's request for a delay, due to the need to finish preparations for the deployment of gas equipment, and Haig's approval of this decision suggest that both men still held faith in the novel weapon. It is reasonable to assume that, as at Loos, it was hoped that gas would compensate for the lack of artillery support. Historian Albert Palazzo has said of Haig's intentions with gas:

> Haig's use of gas was an attempt to compress "the struggle for supremacy" phase of a battle down to one instant. Instead of the extended battle of fire superiority codified in their pre-war manuals, the British gambled on the hope that surprise and the enemy's poor anti-gas preparations would cause the toxic vapours to sweep the enemy from the field and allow the British to combine the advance of the fire line and the launch of the decisive blow into a single phase, leading to breakthrough, pursuit and decisive success.[61]

However, contemporary sources suggest that, by the time of this attack, First Army was well aware that both the moral and physical effect of gas on the enemy was far less than first hoped. An intelligence document, dated 10 October 1915 from First Army files contains the following: "Translation of a German Document: '56 Regiment: Up

59 TNA: WO195/59, Haking to Haig, 7 October 1915.

60 This phrase was originally mentioned in Minute, 1 October 1913 from Col. Harper, (Deputy Director of Military Operations to DM10), in *Staff Manual, War,* 1912, (TNA: WO32/4731). The increasing the role of Corps Commanders is further discussed by A. Simpson, 'British Corps Command on the Western Front' in G. Sheffield & D. Todman (eds) *Command and Control on the Western Front,* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2007 [2004]), p. 98.

61 A. Palazzo, *Seeking Victory on the Western Front: The British Army and Chemical Warfare in World War 1*, (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2002 [2000]), p. 76.

to present 72 gas casualties have appeared in hospitals, amongst them a number of officers. No deaths have been recorded so far from gas. On the other hand a large number of the cases are of unconsciousness, severe bronchitis, and the discharge of blood and yellow material from the mouth'".[62] A typical German regiment contained approximately 3,000 personnel and 56th Regiment were known to be one of five regiments facing British attacks on 25 September.[63] Given the evidence of the limited lethality of gas, it seems reasonable to suggest that Haking saw the use of the weapon in October as a hopeful gamble rather than a guarantee of certain success.

At 1300 hours on 13 October gas was released from over a thousand cylinders across the whole of the division's front line. This lasted for thirty minutes to allow it to drift into the enemy trenches. The *Official History* states that: "There was a south-west wind of about five miles an hour. This was ideal, except in the sector near the canal – where only a few cylinders here and there were discharged".[64] The concentration of gas at Hohenzollern was denser than it had been at the Battle of Loos, an effect achieved by the pairing of cylinders, which were opened simultaneously, further aided by the aforementioned favourable weather.[65] Drawing upon lessons learnt from the 25 September, the gas was switched off thirty minutes prior to the attack, so as not to contaminate the attackers.[66] All infantry went forward with the 'hypo' type gas mask half rolled on the top of their head, ready to be pulled down if they encountered their own gas. Yet, although the ideal conditions and improvements in the use of gas sound favourable, James Edmonds noted: "But the gas did not provide even the limited assistance which it had given on 25th September; in fact it chiefly served to give the enemy warning that an infantry assault was imminent".[67]

Some of this ineffectiveness may be explained by atmospherics. When closely analysed, the wind speed may not have been as 'favourable' as suggested. For example if the gas was travelling at 5 miles per hour it would take approximately two to four minutes to reach the furthest objective, Fosse 8, which was 400 to 500 yards away from the British lines. As the gas was switched off ten minutes prior to the attack, the gas would have passed over the German front lines, with six minutes of 'clean air' behind it.[68] Testimony of German soldiers suggests that this gap was vital. For example Hauptman Wolff stated: "Holding on was utter torment. It was only due to the fact that the concentration of gas was not lethal and the combination of October sunshine and wind drove it upwards, that the men were not rendered totally inca-

62 TNA: WO95/159, 'Translation of a German Document, British Gas Attack 25-9-15'.
63 J. Sheldon, *The German Army on the Western Front 1915,* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword), 2012, p. 207.
64 Edmonds, *Official History, 1915, Vol. 2*, p. 381.
65 D. Richter, *Chemical Soldiers – British Gas Warfare in World War One,* (London: Leo Cooper, 1994), pp. 95-97.
66 Ibid.
67 Edmonds, *Official History 1915, Vol. 2*, p. 381.
68 Peaple, *The 46th (North Midland) Division T.F.*, p. 86.

pable of action". He also described how his comrades lit small fires on their trench parapets which had the effect of driving the gas and smoke upwards.[69] However, the six minute gap of clean air meant that the Germans had time to recover. At the very moment when the attackers were crossing no man's land and at their most vulnerable the Germans had recovered sufficiently to open rifle and machine gun fire against them, resulting in heavy British casualties.

There is also evidence to suggest that the placement of the cylinders in the front line hampered the assaulting troops in getting out of their own trenches. Lieutenant Colonel Martin, one of the battalion commanders who took part in the Hohenzollern attack reported the following to Edmonds:

> The starting off of the attack was not made any easier by the fact that the two rear platoons of the companies had to be put into the second line trench, on the account of the space taken up by the gas cylinders in the front line; this meant the men in these platoons had to get down into the front line trench and up again out of it, as there were very few bridges available for crossing it. This difficulty was very well got over by all of them. The gas was a very doubtful blessing to us.[70]

In addition to poison gas, for the last thirty minutes, smoke was released from grenades and canisters to confuse the enemy and provide cover for those going into no man's land. The smoke was to be released from a combination of: "1000 fumite or threlfallito hand grenades, 1000 lachrymator and five 95 millemeter *(sic)* mortars, firing phosphor bombs".[71] These weapons were not without their hazards. According to the operational order for their use: "the fumite and threlfallito hand grenades emit white phosphor powder which is apt to set men's clothes on fire" and the lachrymator grenades: "have an intensely irritating effect on the eyes".[72] It is possible that the smoke's effect on the eyes may have been mistaken by the attacking soldiers as gas, causing them to panic. Early on in the action, Captain Hills described seeing "a considerable number of men coming back from the Redoubt: their officers and N.C.O.'s killed, they themselves worn out by the exertions of the past 24 hours, half gassed by the chlorine, shot at by machine guns from every quarter, had been broken by bombing attacks from every trench they attacked".[73] Hills then described how these men were rounded up and persuaded to return. For these reasons, it appears that smoke released from grenades and canisters would not be employed in later offensives.

69 J. Sheldon, *The German Army on the Western Front 1915,* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2012), pp. 239-40.
70 TNA: CAB45/120, Lt. Col. Martin, 1/4th Lincolns to Sir J.E. Edmonds, 8 September 1926.
71 Leicester Records Office: DE 6007/201/5, 'Instructions for Use of Smoke'.
72 Ibid.
73 Hills, *Fifth Leicestershire,* p.70.

Surprisingly, after the attack, Haig reviewed the latest trial of gas in a highly favourable way. This was probably due to the influence of those surrounding him, particularly the man in charge of the new weapon, Lieutenant Colonel Foulkes. Haig reported to the Prime Minster H. H. Asquith that: "The preparations for the attack with gas bombardment was highly satisfactory".[74] Similarly, Foulkes wrote: "the enemy's rifle fire stopped almost immediately when the gas reached them, and the infantry of the 46th Division reached the redoubt at 2pm with very little loss".[75] This was completely untrue and is a statement born of either ignorance or vested interest.

Given the heavy casualties suffered and overall lack of operational success, the conclusion must be that gas released from cylinders, as a weapon being used to assist a large formation of attacking infantry, was a failure. In fact it was the last time it would be used in this way. Work by Simon Jones shows that cylinder attacks that followed in 1916 were primarily for distracting and "harassing" purposes, whilst preparations for attacks elsewhere were under way.[76] It would be the introduction of gas launched from mortars and artillery shells from late 1916 onwards that would provide the BEF with a truly useful weapon. The real value of gas at Loos is summed up by Palazzo who states: "The battle demonstrated a willingness to experiment with the army's operational parameters … Loos showed that the operational principles of the British army were not rigid or nonreactive".[77] The further refinements used in October, such as the deployment of double cylinders, confirm Palazzo's argument. However, these comparatively minor innovations were not enough to secure victory.

Grenades

Attacks by the BEF during 1915 and 1916 were often spearheaded by "bombers" hurling grenades. Grenades were used in abundance to take enemy trenches and beat off counter attacks. The weapon was seen to be the tactical answer to the deadlock of trench warfare, causing William Robertson, then Quartermaster General of the BEF to write to his Master General of Ordnance:

> Now that the trenches are so close to each other, in many cases about 20 yds apart, grenades are in great request. In fact it seems to be the chief form of attack and defence, and without them it is considered to be practically impossible to

74 Haig to Prime Minister Asquith, 24 November 1915, quoted in G. Sheffield & J. Bourne, *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914- 1918,* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2005), pp. 170-71.
75 C. H. Foulkes, *"Gas!" The Story of the Special Brigade,* (London: Blackwood, 1935), pp. 88-89.
76 S. Jones, *World War I Gas Warfare Tactics and Equipment,* (Oxford: Osprey, 2007), pp. 26, 42 and 52.
77 Palazzo, *Seeking Victory on the Western Front*, p.76.

> hold trenches. The Germans have a large number of them and are constantly using them.[78]

Initially, tactics involving the mass use of grenades seem to have worked, but an over reliance on the weapon gave rise to comments by veterans such as Frank Richards who complained: "Everyone at this time was bomb mad".[79] The attack at the Hohenzollern would ultimately support this assertion.

The planning meeting on 6 October had discussed weaponry and tactics in an attempt to learn lessons from the earlier attacks at Loos. The notes detail how the 9th (Scottish) Division gave two grenades to every man in their attack, however, "as nearly all were hit, the bombs were lost".[80] Therefore "large parties of bombers are required, 25-40 strong, followed by about 40 other men all carrying bombs are recommended" and "about 50 men are required at the bomb store to carry up ample supplies of bombs". It was also noted that "rifle grenades are consequently useful".[81]

Various war diaries for the units involved contain entries for the days leading up to 13 October, listing training involving "bomb throwing", or "bombing parties paraded for special instruction".[82] They suggest that the attacking battalions of the 46th (North Midland) Division were starting to think along the lines of specialists within the platoons, such as sections acting as "bombers". It was such platoon specialisation that was to prove so successful in the latter years of the war.[83] However, the approach was in its infancy in 1915.

Stuart-Wortley had heeded the recommendations of his fellow officers and made sure that there was an adequate supply of bombs for his troops in the attack. Furthermore, men were initially kept re-supplied whilst at the Redoubt. Captain Hills explained: "These were carried up in bags and boxes from Brewery Keep, Vermelles, to the old front line and thence across no man's land." However, it was not enough to resist the German counter-attack. Hills noted: "At 5pm, the German bombing attacks increased in vigour, and this time a large part of our garrison of the German second line trench gave way and came back to the original front line of the Redoubt, some even to our front line".[84]

78 Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, [LHCMA] 2/1/18, Robertson Papers, William Robertson to Maj. Gen. Sir Stanley von Donop (War Office), 24 December 1915, quoted in J. Spencer, 'Sir William Robertson as Quartermaster General' in S. Jones (ed.) *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force, 1914,* (Solihull: Helion, 2013), p. 100.

79 F. Richards, *Old Soldiers Never Die* (London: Anthony Rowe Ltd., 1933), p. 132.

80 TNA: WO95/2662, 'Notes Made At a Visit', Holland & Dean.

81 Ibid.

82 *Battalion Diaries* of 1/6 Staffordshire Regiment, 11 October 1915 and 1/4 Lincolnshire Regiment for 10 October 1915.

83 P. Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front, The British Army's Art of Attack 1916–18* (Yale: 1994).

84 Hills, *The Fifth Leicestershire*, p. 79.

The widespread use of grenades during the attack revealed another problem. Grenade blasts damaged the trenches and the resulting debris caused blockages, leading to difficulties moving forward. Stuart-Wortley reported in the divisional diary: "The ends of the trenches were damaged by the bombs and the bombers consequently found themselves in the open".[85] This exposed these specialist troops to rifle and machine-gun fire, and they consequently suffered heavy losses.

There were further problems which Stuart-Wortley could not have foreseen. Hills described an unfortunate situation: "Then came the cruellest blow of fortune, for many of the bags and boxes of bombs sent up during the afternoon were found to contain bombs without detonators, many others were filled with types of grenade we had never seen".[86] The attacking troops therefore began to run out of grenades at a crucial moment, ultimately being forced to fall back in the face of vigorous German counter-attacks. As we shall see, when this happened they had little to show for their efforts. Whilst it is impossible now to pinpoint the blame for this unfortunate state of affairs, the duty of supply lay with the corps and once again reflects poorly on the competence of the staff of XI Corps.

This breakdown of supply was critical. The absence of effective artillery support, the limited effect of gas and smoke, and the lack of light machine guns meant that once the attack had commenced the troops were reliant on the grenade to carry the attack forward and defend hard won ground. Thus, once they ran out of grenades, the attack simply stalled. Furthermore, the British ability to defend the captured ground against German counter-attacks was seriously compromised and often meant eventual retreat from of hard-won positions. This represented a fundamental weakness of the BEF at this stage of the war. Indeed, it was not until 1917 when the infantry had been well trained to fight in small formations as promoted in military pamphlets such as SS 143 *Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*, that the problems were truly resolved.[87]

Attack & Assessment

The infantry attack commenced at 2pm as planned. 138th Brigade, (4th Leicestershire and 5th Lincolnshire) were on the left flank, and tasked to take the Redoubt. 137th Brigade, (5th and 6th North Staffordshire and 5th and 6th South Staffordshire) on the right, were tasked to take "The Dump" (a large slag heap) and "Fosse 8" (a pit-head), situated behind it. According to First Army War Diary, all went well, as by 2.30pm: "XI Corps reported that our infantry has taken the Hohenzollern Redoubt,

85 TNA: WO95/2662, 'Report on the Operations of the 46th Division, 13/10/15'.
86 Hills, *The Fifth Leicestershire,* p. 84.
87 Griffith, *Battle Tactics,* pp. 74-79.

but the enemy's machine guns were active on the dump, and that our guns were being turned against them".[88]

However, sources from 46th Division paint a far darker picture. The bombardment, gas and smoke had failed to kill many of the front line defenders and had singularly failed to silence their machine guns. Philip Game was the principal staff officer to Stuart-Wortley. He wrote the following in relation to the commencement of the attack: "We got a report at Divisional Headquarters 10 minutes before the attack started that the German machine guns had opened a very heavy fire all along our front line trench. We realised then that the attack was almost inevitably doomed to failure but of course it was too late to stop it".[89]

Unit diaries support Game's bleak assessment. The diary of the 5th North Staffords states: "The bombardment did not affect the "South Face" or the "Dump Trench" … there was a great deal of sniping from these trenches".[90] Captain Hills of the 5th Leicesters wrote: "The start was disastrous. Colonel Martin and his Adjutant were both wounded, Colonel Sandall wounded and his adjutant killed in the first few minutes, and the machine gun fire along the whole of our front was terrific".[91] Hills could also observe 137th Brigade and commented on their efforts:

> Meanwhile on our right the Staffordshires had fared even worse than our Brigade. Starting from their second line, they were exposed to machine gun fire from all sides, and very few even reached their own front line, whilst row upon row were wiped out in their gallant effort to advance.[92]

Lieutenant Colonel Raymer of 5th South Staffords summarised the situation succinctly:

> My casualties were mainly from the two rear companies, very few men of which reached their comrades in front, shrapnel and machine-gun fire accounting for most of them. The two companies in the forward trenches made a determined effort to get on, but every officer and man who managed to climb out of the trench became a casualty, and progress was impossible. I am quite certain that no one in my battalion ever reached Dump Trench.[93]

88 TNA: WO95/159, First Army War Diary, 13 October 1915.
89 TNA: CAB45/120, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Philip W. Game to Edmonds, 19 January 1927.
90 W. Meakin, *The Fifth North Staffords and the North Midland Territorials*, (Longton: Hughes & Harber, 1920), p. 122.
91 Hills, *The Fifth Leicestershire,* p.76.
92 Ibid., p.77.
93 TNA: CAB45/121, Lieutenant Colonel R.R. Raymer, 1/5th South Staffs to Edmonds, 26 June 1926.

138th Brigade was also suffering heavy casualties from enfilade fire from The Dump and Mad Point. Three out of the four battalion commanders had become casualties, yet even though he was wounded, the 4th Leicestershire commander, Lieutenant Colonel Martin, was described as "in great pain but still direct[ing] operations, receiving and giving orders".[94]

The costs of inadequate preparation had been starkly revealed. The main threats to the attacking forces had come from exactly the points warned against by officers of the 9th Division only a few days earlier. Supporting artillery had simply failed to knock out these positions and the infantry paid the price. Stuart-Wortley had tried to some extent to counter this threat. He had ordered the Staffordshire Brigade to attack five minutes behind their Lincolnshire and Leicestershire comrades, in an effort to divert fire from these points away from them. It seems that this plan had little effect.

At 5.25pm Stuart-Wortley ordered forward various companies from his reserve, 139th Brigade (5th, 6th, 7th and 8th Nottingham and Derbyshire Regiment), to support the attack. Although intended to assist the drive on Fosse 8, the formation ended up propping up the two other brigades in "Big Willie" and "Little Willie" trenches. Fortunately for them they did not become the main focus of German fire whilst advancing, as this was still being directed against 137th and 138th Brigades. Consequently their casualty rate was to amount to less than half that of their Midland colleagues.

However, by 6pm there was finally some positive news from the front. Elements of 138th Brigade had secured the front two sides of the Hohenzollern Redoubt known as "South Face" and "West Face," plus lengths of the German communication trenches to the Redoubt, ("Big Willie" and "Little Willie") were in British hands. The earlier training ordered by Stuart-Wortley proved invaluable here as the battle for the trenches consisted of rushes with bayonets and bombs.

Yet this marked the high water mark of the British attack. By 9pm the men of 46th Division had gone as far as they could and were consolidating their gains with the help of troops from the Monmouthshire Regiment, 1st Field Company Royal Engineers and the reserve battalions of 139th Brigade. The cost of the assault had been grave; 137th and 138th Brigade had been reduced to an effective strength of just two companies each.[95] Furthermore, during the twilight a localised German counter-attack wrestled back a small portion of the eastern edge of the "West Face" of the Redoubt.

There is a strong suggestion that, despite the courageous efforts of 46th Division, it was looked down upon by senior officers because of its Territorial origin. For example, despite First Army's diary noting that the 12th Division were having a terrible time on the southern flank, there is an insinuation that the Territorials were lacking drive: "The XI Corps reported that the G.O.C. XI Corps was going up to see the G.O.C.

94 Milne, *Footprints,* p. 55.
95 TNA: WO95/2662, 'Report on the Operations of the 46th Division, 13/10/15'.

46th Division with a view to getting him to push on".[96] This suggests that Haking did not think that Stuart-Wortley was doing all he could to make necessary progress. As has been illustrated, this criticism was unfair and unwarranted. No amount of courage could offset the deficiencies of preparation.

In fairness, following his visit to Stuart-Wortley's headquarters, Haking appears to have realised that the division was simply unable to "push up" due to heavy losses and the strength of enemy resistance. Haking reported to Haig at 11pm, stating that both 46th and 12th Division had sustained such severe casualties that they were not in a position to fight on.[97] Haking suggested sending in the Guards Division to relieve the battle worn divisions during the night and then resuming the offensive in the morning, but acknowledged that this was fraught with practical difficulties. Haig rejected the idea and proposed a different approach: "The Army Commander agreed to the Guards Division not being put in on the night of 13th/14th October. The 12th and 46th Divisions were to be reformed and re-organised with a view to pushing on again. The enemy was to be allowed no rest".[98] This contradicted an important element of *Field Service Regulations* that had enshrined the authority of the 'man on the spot'. Haking was in a much better position to assess and make the necessary operational decisions. In this case, he seems to have been overruled by Haig who had, ironically, written this military operational guidance himself.

The battle scarred remnants of 137th and 138th Brigades managed to withdraw and re-group during the night, leaving 139th Brigade to consolidate and hold the hard won territory. Many of the wounded were still in no man's land and there are graphic accounts from those such as Private Rushton, who managed to crawl back to his own lines.[99] Given the damage the division had sustained during the assault, there was little else that Stuart-Wortley could do to improve his position.

However, Haig's diary entry for 13 October took a dim view of 46th Division's commander. He stated: "Only 2 battalions remained in the Divisional General's hand. He had apparently used up his reserves before they were really required".[100] This criticism is unfair. Haig clearly believed Stuart-Wortley had made an error of judgement in the timing for the deployment of his reserves, but this ignores the fact that the attack was stalled and Haking was urging 46th Division to "push on". The only option available to Stuart-Wortley was to commit his reserve brigade, and, as has been illustrated, the deployment of 139th Brigade actually allowed the division to achieve some small success by 6pm. Beyond the facts of the matter, there is also an element of

96 TNA: WO95/159, First Army War Diary, 13 October 1915.
97 TNA: WO95/159, First Army War Diary, 13 October 1915.
98 TNA: WO95/159, First Army War Diary, 13 October 1915.
99 For example see: *Lincolnshire Echo*, 22 September, 2007, previously unpublished diary of Private Bernard Rushton, 1/4th Lincolns Also: M. Richardson, *Fighting Tigers,* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2002), pp. 49-52.
100 Sheffield & Bourne, *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters,* 13 October 1915, p. 164.

Lieutenant General Sir Richard Haking (on horseback second from right) GOC XI Corps in 1913. (Editor's collection)

hypocrisy in the criticism, for Haig himself had complained bitterly of being unable to deploy his reserves early enough during the Battle of Loos.

Ultimately, Haig's plan for 12th and 46th Division to resume the attack was not carried out. During the early hours of 14 October 1915, 3rd Guards Brigade relieved 139th Brigade at the west face of the Hohenzollern Redoubt. The relief was timely. Shortly before the arrival of the Guards, the Germans had launched a strong counter-attack which had been beaten off by battalions of the Sherwood Foresters who "believed the enemy suffered severely."[101] The defence of the position would prove to be the last act of the battle for 46th Division.

It was merciful that 46th Division was not required to regroup and attack again, for it had suffered horrendous losses and was in no fit state to fight. Therefore, for the time being, all attacks were halted. When Haig learned from Sir John French that the French Tenth Army had failed in its attempts to take Vimy Ridge, further efforts to capture the Hohenzollern Redoubt and Fosse 8 were postponed. Following torrential rain at the end of October the decision to halt operations was recorded formally on 4 November 1915.[102] The battle was over.

101 TNA: WO95/2662, 'Report on the Operation of the 46th Division, October 13th and 14th 1915'.

102 Edmonds, *Official History, 1915, Vol. 2*, p. 390.

Post-Attack Grievances

In operational terms the attack was a clear failure. It had failed to secure the pre-battle objectives; 46th Division had gained a toe-hold in the Redoubt but had made virtually no progress against Fosse 8. At around 5pm on 13 October, a party of about 50 soldiers of 5th Lincolnshire Regiment, armed with two machine guns, had managed to seize a section of Fosse Trench. That trench was situated about 50 yards behind the Redoubt and this was the furthest forward any troops had managed to advance. However, after approximately two hours they ran out of ammunition and were forced to retire.[103]

The battalions of 12th (Eastern) Division fared no better. They did not capture "the Quarries" in its entirety; as their divisional history states: "The day's fighting resulted in the capture of Gun Trench, the south-western face of the Quarries, with the exception of a portion in the centre, and the greater part of the north-western face, to be known later as the Hairpin trench".[104] In effect they had created two small salients in the line which ultimately proved difficult to defend in the face of enfilade fire. Further to the right, the elements of the 1st Division (IV Corps) that assisted had made no significant gains.[105] This is an important point. Although all the British attacks had failed, post-battle criticism from senior commanders focused solely on the performance of the 46th Division.

Total casualties for 46th Division amounted to 3,763 officers and men. The two brigades that had led the attack, 137th and 138th, had suffered an appalling casualty rate of 55% of officers and 44% of other ranks. The two brigades lost approximately 1,500 men each, with 139th Brigade losing 430 soldiers[106] To provide perspective, it is worth remembering that the losses at the Hohenzollern Redoubt are 50 per cent greater than those suffered during the division's disastrous attack at Gommecourt at the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916, when 2,455 men fell.[107]

Comparative losses amongst the German defenders of the Redoubt are difficult to assess due to the differing methodology used to record casualties in the *Verlustliste.* Edmonds estimated the total German casualties sustained for the whole of the Loos period, (25 September to 4 November 1915), amounted to approximately 26,000.[108] There are no exact figures for the losses during the fighting of 13-14 October.

At the end of October 1915 the Douai plain remained in German hands. The French had failed to take Vimy Ridge and had gained little ground in the Champagne area.

103 TNA: WO95/2662, 'Report on the Operation of the 46th Division, October 13th and 14th 1915'.
104 Maj. Gen. Sir A. B. Scott, *The History of the 12th (Eastern) Division in the Great War,* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1923), pp. 22-23.
105 Edmonds, *Official History, 1915, Vol, 2,* p.388.
106 Ibid., p. 392.
107 M. Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme,* (London: Penguin, 1984 [1971]), p. 266.
108 Edmonds, *Official History, 1915, Vol. 2,* p. 401.

Whilst some historians, such as Nick Lloyd and Gordon Corrigan,[109] have argued that the British army came close to a breakthrough on 25 and 26 September, the sum total of achievements amounted to the village of Loos itself, a collection of pitheads and mine works and approximately 8,000 yards of enemy line.[110] The attack at the Hohenzollern Redoubt had gained a foothold in the strongpoint itself and taken some short sections of German front line trenches at the cost of immense casualties. As an offensive operation it can only be regarded as a failure.

Recriminations soon followed against the planners and commanders. On 22 November 1915 the Staffordshire MP, Lieutenant Colonel Josiah Wedgwood, wrote directly to Prime Minister Herbert Asquith. Wedgwood had compiled a report on 137th Brigade's efforts, based on conversations with their survivors and wounded, and was furious at such a severe loss of life for so little gain. He argued that the generals should be changed, suggesting this might restore morale. In relation to the attack itself, he identified the over optimism in the preparation and asked some pertinent questions about the objectives set, such as: "Why was it thought to be such a 'soft thing' that an objective far beyond the bounds of possibility was set: and that supports were moved up in the open, instead of their communication trenches?" He added: "Why were there no responsible people on the spot to stop the attack taking place when the Artillery observation was still obviously incomplete?" He summed up with:

> The destruction of this brigade is only a sample of what has gone on too often. If it were not for the loyalty of Higher Command to each other, both the Army Corps General Haking and the Divisional General Montagu Stuart-Wortley – would long ago be enjoying their pensions in this country instead of throwing away the lives of heroes.[111]

The point about morale was clearly picked up by Edmonds when compiling the *Official History*. Following his circulation of draft chapters to various correspondents concerning the 46th Division's attack, a number of officers asked him to remove the phrase: "a certain demoralisation set in".[112] Indeed, there is no such reference in the published edition and it is not now possible to establish the exact context of this remark.

Asquith, on receipt of Wedgwood's correspondence, immediately sent it to Haig for his comment. Whilst Haig's reply rejected most of Wedgwood's findings, it also played into his hands, for it allowed him to redirect the blame to the divisional commander, Stuart-Wortley, and the fighting quality of his troops. Haig's damnation

109 Lloyd, *Loos 1915,* Corrigan, *The Unwanted Battle.*
110 Edmonds, *Official History, 1915, Vol. 2,* p. 367.
111 IWM: PP/MCR/104, Wedgwood Papers.
112 TNA: CAB45/120 & 45/121, Correspondence with Sir J. E. Edmonds concerning Loos Offensive.

of 46th Division quoted two sources: an unnamed gas officer and the commander of the Guards Division, Lord Cavan. The former allegedly reported that there was no advance on Fosse 8 upon release of the gas "for nearly an hour … there was no hostile fire in the ground … Yet the Territorials in question only advanced to our old trench line and held!" And that: "the attack was made by officers and NCO's, but few rank and file followed them." Lord Cavan had informed Haig: "that the companies of the 46th Division who had been ordered to attack towards the line of the Dump-Quarries did not go forward 40 yards".[113] By quoting such evidence Haig clearly implied that 137th and 138th Brigades were ineffectual and lacking courage. He ultimately drew the conclusion that there was a "want of discipline in the 46th Division and general ignorance of war conditions".[114] It is significant that Haig deliberately mentioned the Territorial status of the division in his summary. The inference can be reached that Haig had formed a bias against such units. This assertion is supported by the fact that in the next major BEF offensive, the Battle of the Somme (1 July to 14 November 1916) just four of seventeen divisions involved in the initial assault were Territorial; furthermore, two of these were used in the diversionary attack at Gommecourt.[115] Haig's letter to Asquith would also have given credence and value to the formation of the New Army units and therefore subtly added pressure for their continued training and supply.

Haig's criticism of 46th Division is unfair and the evidence supplied is doubtful. The comments from the unnamed gas officer can easily be explained by the hour between the gas being released (1pm) and the commencement of the infantry attack (2pm). The artillery plan directed the intense two-hour barrage toward more rearward targets from 1pm, to allow the gas to be directed toward the first line of enemy trenches.[116] This could have been interpreted as a lull in shooting, particularly if the Germans were not retaliating at this point.

Contemporary evidence clearly indicates that the assault formations left their own trenches and advanced at their allotted time. Cavan's comment about 137th Brigade only making 40 yards of ground is indicative not of "want of discipline", but rather the dreadful casualties they suffered as they struggled forward. Indeed, the determination to advance against unbroken German defences suggests that both morale and discipline were high in 46th Division. Furthermore, reports from their battalion commanders, such as Lt. Col. Raymer, and also the battalion, brigade and divisional War Diaries all indicate that many soldiers of all ranks initially progressed much further than 40 yards, before being forced to retire as the day wore on.

113 Haig to Prime Minister Asquith, 24 November 1915, quoted in Sheffield & Bourne, *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters*, pp. 170-71.
114 Ibid.
115 Middlebrook, *The First Day of the Somme,* pp. 318-24.
116 TNA: WO195/59, XI Corps, 'Scheme for the Attack, 6 October 1915'.

Whilst Haig was dismissive of the division as a whole, he reserved particular criticism for Stuart-Wortley. Haig wrote: "I do not think much of Major-General Stuart-Wortley as a Divisional Commander and have already spoken to the GOC XI Corps on the subject".[117] It is difficult to understand on what basis Haig formed this opinion. Both Haig and Haking approved the plan of attack submitted by the divisional commander and it appears that the latter did his best to follow it to the letter. It may have been that Stuart-Wortley's original idea – of a series of limited, step by step attacks – was seen as unambitious, over cautious and indicative of a man lacking in 'offensive spirit.' By contrast, Haking – who escaped any censure for his role in the October offensive – has been assessed by his biographer as a man who continually promoted the offensive, thus gaining a reputation as a 'thruster,' for he: "placed his commitment concerning the doctrine of the offensive and this was demonstrated in his whole-hearted promotion of a variety of minor operations designed to dominate no man's land, wear down the Germans and provide battle experience for his troops".[118] Furthermore, Haking was a pre-war Regular who had made his name commanding a brigade in 1914, and thus was not tarnished with the damning label of 'Territorial'.

Recent biographers of Haig, such as Gary Sheffield are largely supportive of his performance in the First World War. However, even Sheffield describes Haig as "ungenerous" and "unfair" to blame the failure of the Hohenzollern attack on the Stuart-Wortley.[119] One theory as to Haig's growing resentment of Stuart-Wortley could have been due to the discovery that the latter was writing to the King and providing him with accounts of recent events. Haig may have feared that the letters of his subordinate would undermine his own position. Indeed, on 29 October Stuart-Wortley received a message from Haking: "He [Haking] informed me that by my writing to His Majesty I had incurred the displeasure of the Army Commander, then Sir Douglas Haig".[120] Haig's resentment did not relent. On 2 November he wrote in his diary: "I doubt whether he [Stuart-Wortley] is fit to command a division".[121] When Haking went on leave that month, Haig made Lord Cavan acting commander of XI Corps, despite the fact that Stuart-Wortley actually outranked Cavan by seniority of service. This was a serious and deliberate snub.

Stuart-Wortley was likely unaware that he was a pawn in a bigger game of personal politics being played out in the most senior ranks of the British Army. At the time of writing his letter to Asquith, Haig was only 12 days away from being offered overall command of the BEF. Haig's diary at this time is concerned with his complaints about Sir John French's ability as commander of the BEF and his handling of General

117 Haig to Prime Minister Asquith, 24 November 1915, quoted in Sheffield & Bourne, *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters*, pp. 170-71.
118 Senior, *Haking*, p. 9.
119 Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 130.
120 Stuart-Wortley Correspondence, Royal Archives, RA/PS/GV/Q_976/3, quoted in M. Senior, *Haking*, pp. 68-69.
121 TNA: WO256, Haig Diary, 2 November 1915.

Reserve during the Battle of Loos. He knew his complaints would reach Asquith and was reliant on Lord Kitchener and Haking to support his case. His diary entry for 24 October records the King canvassing for views on Sir John's performance during the battle and contains the following: "The King said that he had seen General's Gough and Haking that afternoon, and they had told him startling truths of French's unfitness for command."[122] Haig knew that Haking had been supportive of his cause, and it can therefore be surmised that Haig would return the loyalty in protecting Haking from any criticism following the failed attack on 13 October. Instead, Haig simply used the pretext provided by Wedgwood's complaints to push the blame solely on the Stuart-Wortley and his division for the failures at the Hohenzollern Redoubt. It is no coincidence that the 46th Division was subsequently earmarked for service away from the Western Front, with some units embarked for the Middle East in December.

Conclusion

In operational and strategic terms the attack on the Hohenzollern Redoubt achieved nothing, giving credence to Edmonds's assertion that it brought nothing more than a tragic waste of life. An attack launched in the name of alliance politics, it was poorly planned, poorly resourced and, despite earnest attempts at innovation, poorly executed. It was then further tarnished by an unedifying search for a scapegoat that revealed Haig at his worst.

Yet, as Edmonds noted, "there is more to be learnt from ill-success … than from victories."[123] There were some positives that arose from the attack. It was now clear to Haig and others around him that a major reassessment of the army's offensive methods was required. Gas and smoke did not make up for deficiencies in artillery and lack of shells containing high explosive. The October action was the last time that the British would use poison gas as a linchpin of a major attack. At the tactical level, the BEF realised that the "bomb mania" of 1915 was misleading. Although an important weapon, infantry could not rely on the grenade alone in order to gain and hold territory. The Battle of Loos and the attack on the Hohenzollern Redoubt had shown that additional weapons such as mortars, light machine guns and rifles needed to be employed with the attacking infantry. This was apparent immediately after the attacks had finished. More training would be required with these weapons for future attacks, but this would inevitably take time.

Things were to change for the better. Loos was to prove a real turning point in terms of the future of artillery deployment and tactics in future operations. The Royal Artillery absorbed the painful lessons of 1915 and there were swift and far reaching developments in air observation and artillery co-operation. This was achieved by the implementation of standard operating procedures across the BEF, such as radio to

122 TNA: WO256, Haig Diary, 24 October 1915.
123 Edmonds, *Official History,* 1915, Vol.1, p. vi.

ground signalling, counter-battery headquarters and artillery liaison officers at squadrons. This was not without its problems and proved to be a challenging task, due to the opposition encountered. A veteran officer stated:

> The greatest difficulty was experienced at first in getting the gunners to confer to the best methods of ranging for air observation. They were a strongly individualistic corps and each battery commander had his own theories about working his guns and many at first intensely resented being interfered with.[124]

The report goes onto list wholesale changes carried out by the Royal Flying Corps and artillery which would eventually overcome such 'individualism' and radically improve the success of artillery in future offensive campaigns. These developments have been well documented by historians and as Sheffield has pointed out, Haig was later to prove himself as an effective commander in chief by facilitating these and other changes to the way the BEF conducted its operations. The battles around Loos had been the catalyst for these changes.

However, although the BEF as a whole would learn from its experiences and consequently improve, the attack at the Hohenzollern Redoubt unfairly tarnished the reputation of 46th Division, its commander Stuart-Wortley and the Territorial Army in general. As this chapter has shown, the attacking troops did exactly what was requested of them and were defeated not by want of courage or discipline, but by the unbroken German defences which British artillery and gas had failed to neutralise. Stuart-Wortley had handled his division as best he could, learning from fellow officers, implementing special training, and deploying his reserves as required. It is difficult to see what more he could have done. It is unfortunate that 46th Division suffered a similar fate at Gommecourt in July 1916, which further sullied its already damaged reputation in the eyes of senior command.[125] The division would not have the opportunity to prove its detractors wrong until 1918, when it carried out the brilliant and successful assault on the Hindenburg Line during the Battle of Bellenglise.[126]

In conclusion, the attack on the Hohenzollern Redoubt had proven to the French that the BEF were willing and dependable allies; it had produced some tactical innovations, and it had given impetus for further developments in tactics, equipment and training. However the price for this knowledge was, as so often in 1915, a very high cost in blood.

124 TNA: CAB45/120, Air Commodore Ludlow-Hewitt to Edmonds, 24 September 1926.
125 A. MacDonald, *Lack of Offensive Spirit?* (Milton Keynes: Iona, 2008).
126 R.E Priestley, *Breaking the Hindenburg Line: the Story of the 46th (North Midland) Division,* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1919) describes the division's highly acclaimed assault at the Battle of Bellenglise (29 September – 1 October 1918).

Index

PEOPLE

Adams, Lieutenant Kingston 295, 303, 305, 318
Alderson, Lieutenant-General Sir E.A.H. viii, 205-206, 208-209, 212, 215-221, 223-226, 242, 275-276
Allenby, Lieutenant-General Sir Edmund 319-320, 412
Asquith, Prime Minister Herbert 31, 90, 99, 121, 424, 432-435

Bates, Major ix, 229, 237, 245-246, 256
Birchall, Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur 207, 211, 219
Boyle, Lieutenant-Colonel Russell 213, 217-218, 222
Brind, Major J.E.S. 117-119
Butler, Sir Richard 116, 192, 201
Butterworth, Arthur 292, 298, 302

Callwell, Major General C.E. 85, 89, 96-97, 99
Capper, Major-General Thompson vii-viii, 115, 122, 185-187, 189-192, 197-200, 368-372, 379, 383, 387
Carver, Lieutenant Basil viii, 147-148, 159, 163, 165, 171-172, 174
Cavan, Brigadier-General Lord 111, 120, 414, 433-434
Cavendish, Lieutenant-Colonel Lord Richard ix, 229, 236-237, 239, 245-247, 249, 251-256
Churchill, Winston 52, 86, 90, 94, 96, 226
Congreve, Captain Billy 40, 45, 53, 59
Cook, Sergeant A.J. 317, 335, 345, 355
Cook, Private James 285-286, 289-290, 294, 300, 302, 308
Currie, Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur viii, 204, 212-213, 215-216, 218-226, 275

Dallas, Brigadier-General A.G. 192-193, 395-397
Davies, Major-General Sir Frances viii, 122, 185-187, 189-195, 197-198, 203, 398
Dechiselle Colonel 319, 321, 329
Derby, Lord 283, 308, 310
Donop, Major-General Sir Stanley von 67-68, 71, 105
Downes, Captain O.C. 343-344, 356
Du Cane, Major-General John 105, 184, 391

Edmonds, Sir James (Official Historian) xxvi-xxviii, 35, 37, 40, 42, 44, 46, 50, 53-54, 113, 203, 250, 279, 291, 301, 408, 410, 414, 419, 422-423, 431-432, 435

Fanshawe, Major-General Sir Robert 104, 111, 120, 285, 287
Foch, General/Marshall Ferdinand 188, 244, 250, 260, 280, 362-363, 377, 410
French, Field Marshal Sir John vii, xxviii-xxix, 34-37, 49, 57, 59, 63, 70, 73-75, 80-96, 98, 101-102, 108, 111, 115,

123, 127, 158, 161, 184, 188-189, 193, 197-198, 200-202, 224, 227-228, 238, 244, 250-251, 258-261, 272, 278, 355, 359, 361-366, 369, 374-377, 382-383, 409-411, 430, 434-435

Gathorne-Hardy, Lieutenant-Colonel J.F. 385-386, 415
Geddes, Lieutenant-Colonel A.D. 219, 241-242, 245, 247, 251, 257
King George V 84, 90, 92-93, 96, 100, 102, 186, 434-435
Gough, Lieutenant-General Sir Hubert, vii, 115, 121, 123, 365-369, 373-375, 377, 381-385, 413, 435
Graves, Robert 39-40, 227
Greaves, Private Erlam 292, 294, 302

Haig, General Sir Douglas v, vii-vii, xxviii, 37, 69, 75, 77, 83-84, 88, 91, 93, 102-105, 107, 110-111, 115, 118, 121-123, 130-131, 143, 169, 183-185, 187-203, 258, 261, 272-274, 276, 291-292, 301, 362-367, 369-371, 373-378, 382-384, 389, 391, 393-396, 410, 412-414, 418, 421, 424, 429-430, 432-436
Haking, Major-General Richard x, 45, 121-122, 366, 373, 382, 412-414, 416-418, 421-422, 429-430, 432, 434-435
Haldane, Lord 90, 232, 364
Hamilton, General Sir Ian 35, 91, 122-123, 205, 226, 235
Hankey, Sir Maurice 83, 90, 96, 99, 101
Hawker, Captain Lanoe 132, 136-137
Hawksley, Major J.P.V. 337, 339, 341
Hill, Lieutenant-Colonel F.O.W. (Frederick) 211, 219, 224
Hills, Captain J.D. 416, 420, 423, 425-427Holland, Lieutenant-Colonel S.E. 388, 397, 415
Horne, Major-General Sir Henry v, vii, xxix, 103-111, 115-124, 195-196, 227, 262, 285-286, 287-288, 291
Hudson, Brigadier-General Henry 193, 398, 403
Hughes, Lieutenant-Colonel Garnett 211, 213, 217-218, 221

Immelmann, *Leutnant* Max 140-141, 143-144

Jackson, Colonel Louis 57, 63, 66-69, 71-72, 77-79
James, Lieutenant (later Captain) Archibald 129, 130, 133, 136, 138-139
Joffre, General Joseph vii, 32-33, 35-36, 87, 89, 115, 127, 184, 193, 259, 261, 362-365, 369, 374, 409-410

Keir, Lieutenant-General J.L. 320-322, 325, 332, 355
Kitchener, Lord Horatio Herbert vii, x, xxix, 31-32, 34-36, 42-43, 54-55, 57,65, 67, 70, 80, 84-85, 89-102, 110-111, 121-123, 132, 168, 214, 217-220, 225, 243-244, 247-248, 259, 307, 359, 361, 363, 365, 368, 370, 375, 383, 406, 409-410, 435

Landon, Major-General H.J.S. 369-370, 372
Leckie, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert 212-213, 218, 225
Lipsett, Major-General Louis viii, 207, 212-214, 216, 219-220, 222-223, 225-226
Lloyd George, David xxvi-xxvii, 32, 49, 61-62, 68, 78, 96, 204, 362
Loomis, Brigadier-General F.O.W. viii, 210, 212, 215, 224-225

Marriott, Lieutenant Sydney 284-286, 297, 299, 301, 304-305
Martin, Lieutenant-Colonel 423, 427-428
Maude, Major-General Sir Frederick 38, 123, 127
McClelland, Lieutenant 297, 303, 305-306

McCudden, Corporal James 135, 143-144
Mercer, Major-General Freddy 185, 192, 194-196,
Mercer, Major-General Malcolm 209, 211, 217-220, 223
Monro, General Sir Charles 103-104, 111, 121, 183, 188
Murray, Sir Archibald 83, 94, 98-100

Nicholson, Brigadier-General G.H.W. 404-405

Odlum, Brigadier General V.W. viii, 215-217, 225

Pirrie, Private 302-303, 307
Plumer, Lieutenant-General Sir Herbert 110, 215, 244, 249, 253-254, 312, 320-321, 355, 412
Prowse, Brigadier-General C.B. x, 327, 335, 343, 348
Purser, Private Carl 283, 285, 288, 292, 297, 306

Rawlinson, Major General Sir Henry viii, xxviii, 52-53, 110-111, 127, 183-200, 202-203, 365-366, 374, 377, 390-391, 393-394, 413
Robertson, Sir William "Wully" Robertson v, vii, xxix, 52, 80-90, 92-102, 114, 184-185, 188-189, 195, 197-198, 286, 363-364, 367, 369, 374, 377, 384, 410, 424-425
Robinson, 2nd Lieutenant W.P.A. x, 336-337, 339, 341

Smith-Dorrien, Sir Horace 37, 84, 116, 185, 187-189, 227, 244
Stamfordham, Lord 87, 90, 92, 96
Stephens, Brigadier-General Reginald Byng 399, 401, 403-404, 406-407
Stokes, Wilfred vii, 68-69, 78
Stuart-Wortley, Major-General Edward Montagu x, 411-412, 414-417, 425-429, 432, 434-436

Tennant 147, 152, 156, 176-177
Thesiger, Major-General George 369-370, 384
Trenchard, Lieutenant Colonel Hugh 130-131, 138-139, 141-143
Turner, Lieutenant-General Sir R.E.W. viii, 209-212, 214-215, 217-221, 223-225
Tuxford, Brigadier General G. viii, 210, 212-213, 219, 222-223, 225
Tyrer, Private Richard 294, 298, 303

Vaughan, Lieutenant-Colonel L.R. 117-118, 123, 293

Watson, Major-General Sir D. viii, 210, 211, 218, 224
Wigram, Lieutenant Colonel Clive 93-94, 100, 186
Willcocks, Lieutenant-General Sir James 41, 48-49, 75, 183, 188, 193, 197, 201
Wilson, Major-General Sir Henry vii, x, 59, 82, 84, 90-91, 93, 98-99, 102, 115-116, 186, 321-325, 331-332, 355, 357-358, 365

PLACES

Abbeville 167, 169
Aisne 59, 66, 116, 127, 259
Angle, The 399, 402, 405
Arras 64, 85, 167, 184, 193, 362-363, 409
Artois 125, 139, 167, 332, 409
  Second Battle of Artois 49
  Third Battle of Artois 88, 167
Aubers Ridge, Battle of x, xxii, xxiv, 41-42, 45-46, 48-51, 79, 91, 133, 161-162, 164, 187-188, 192, 197-199, 201-203, 258-261, 267-268, 272, 278, 280, 289, 291-293, 301, 332, 363, 390-391, 393-4, 398, 400, 407

Balkans xxvi, 94-95
Belgium 31, 35, 40, 163, 209, 236, 259, 362, 411
Bellewaarde, 320-322, 326, 358
Bernaville 167-168
Bethune 71, 111, 123, 154, 156, 159, 161, 305
Big Willie (Trench) 377, 379, 428
Boesinghe, 312-315, 327, 345, 348
Bois du Biez 187-188, 193, 197-198
Bois Grenier vi, x, 390, 398-399, 407
Bombay 148-149, 170-171
Bootle 283, 299, 306, 309
Boulogne ix, 62, 225, 295, 411
Bridge 6D 332-333, 346, 351
Bridoux Fort 399-400, 402
Bridoux Salient x, 399, 402

Camberley 112-113, 197, 368, 383
Canada vii, 43, 63-64, 204-211, 213-214, 216, 219, 226
Canadian Orchard 275, 277
Canal-Sap *(Kanalsappe)* 334, 349
Cassel 163-164, 235
Champagne 125, 139, 167, 184, 362, 409, 431
Cite St. Elie 366, 370-371, 378-379, 388, 413
Cite Trench 378-379
Corner Fort 399-400, 402
Corons de Maroc 366, 372
Corons de Pekin 366, 372, 379, 382
Cuinchy 107-108, 110, 184, 284, 305

Dardanelles xxvi, 34, 56, 76, 89-90, 93-94, 97, 99-100, 122-123, 198, 280, 365-366, 410Douai 125, 140, 260, 409, 431
Douai Aerodrome 143
Doullens 167-169
Douvrin 372, 379-380
Dump, The 379-380, 426-428, 433

Egypt 123, 146, 148-149, 167, 171-172, 174, 178
Elverdinghe 329, 335, 349
England xxvii, 79-80, 118, 174, 176, 182, 206, 213, 249, 278, 286-288, 307, 311, 367-368, 374

Farm 14 318, 321-322, 330-331, 344-345, 348-349, 351, 359
Fauquissart 153, 198-199, 201
Festubert 71, 154-155, 157, 159, 260-261, 296, 303, 305
  Battle of Festubert vi, ix, xxiv, xxix-xxx, 41, 45, 48, 51, 79, 85, 121, 149, 154-155, 164, 177, 202-203, 258-261, 266-268, 277-281, 282-283, 287, 290-293, 301, 310-311, 332, 363, 390, 398
Flanders 41-42, 89, 101, 106, 287, 293, 325, 360
Fleetwood 228-230
Fortin 17 318-319, 321-322, 329, 331, 346-347, 359
Fosse 8 366, 369, 371-372, 375, 379-381, 410, 412-415, 418, 421-422, 426, 428, 430-431, 433
Frezenberg 239, 253-255, 257
Fromelles 184, 187, 260, 400

Gallipoli xxvi,xxvii, 43, 45, 82, 90, 97, 101, 123, 363, 365, 398

Germany 32, 34, 56, 58, 63, 66, 81, 83-84, 89-90, 94, 101, 138, 146, 299, 362, 410
G.H.Q. Line 209, 218, 220-221, 225, 253-257
Givenchy xxiv, 107, 153-155, 159, 161, 202, 278, 303, 305, 378
Gommecourt 411, 431, 433, 436
Gravenstafel 215, 220, 222, 239, 253
Gun Trench 378-379, 385, 388, 431

Haisnes 372, 379, 381-382
Hill 14 323-324
Hill 60 53, 162, 177, 253, 411
Hill 70 364-365, 410
Hill Top Ridge 243, 245, 247-248
Hohenzollern Redoubt vi, x, xxix, 46, 69, 365-367, 369, 371-377, 379-380, 384-385, 408-409, 411-412, 417, 419-420, 421-426, 428, 430-432, 434-436
Hooge 136, 165, 253, 313-314, 320-321, 323, 358
Hull's Farm 332-333, 335, 351
Hulluch 364-365, 371, 375, 378-379, 382, 388

India vii, 40-41, 43, 146-148, 150, 156-157, 170-172, 174-176, 213, 368, 370, 390, 399, 411
International Trench vi, x, xxix, 312, 318-319, 325, 327-331, 333, 337, 339-341, 343, 345, 348-349, 352-355, 359

Kitchener's Wood 214, 217-220, 225, 243-244, 247-248

La Bassee 83, 149, 152, 161, 167, 177, 184-185, 196, 260, 290, 305, 364, 369, 372, 379
La Bassee Canal 167, 305, 375, 398, 417
La Quinque Rue 188, 261, 271, 275, 291
Lancashire 228, 230, 232, 282, 311, 369
Lancaster 228, 230-233, 235
Langemarck 132, 241, 313
Le Havre 235, 284
Le Marequet Wood 161-162, 164
Lens 58, 125, 260, 363, 378-379, 409
Lille 137-138, 140, 161, 188, 196, 201, 260, 296
Little Willie Trench 377, 379, 428
Liverpool 299, 303, 306, 308-309
Locality C 215, 219, 224
Lodi Farm 332-333, 351
London 33, 92, 122, 204, 211, 365
Loos 88, 167-168, 364, 408-409, 432
  Battle of Loos vi, xxiv-xxvi, 36, 41, 43-45, 47, 50, 53, 69, 73, 77, 87, 116, 121-122, 139, 167-168, 290, 361-362, 365, 372, 389, 405, 408, 412-413, 417-419, 421-422, 430, 435

Macedonia 89, 94, 97, 123
Mad Point 373, 380-381, 428
Marseilles 148-149, 152, 156-157, 167, 171, 176, 178
Martinsart 165-166
Mauser Ridge 215, 219, 224, 243, 245, 247
Menin Road 255, 314, 320
Merville 131, 188, 192
Mesopotamia 41, 101, 119,
Messines 149, 185, 188, 236, 238, 313
Messines Ridge 188, 236, 238
Mons 38-39, 127, 259
Mouse Trap Farm 211, 219, 253, 255
Mumbai see Bombay

Neuve Chapelle 131, 153-154, 161-162, 167, 177, 184, 186-188, 194, 196, 198, 201, 260
  Battle of Neuve Chapelle v, xxiv-xxv, xxix-xxx, 36, 39, 41, 45, 47-49, 51, 53, 79, 83, 85, 130-132, 139, 149, 161-162, 164, 177, 183-190, 192-193, 196-203, 209, 258-260, 267, 283-284, 293-294, 358, 363, 390, 392-394, 396-397, 400-401, 404, 419
New-Sap (*Neuesappe) 334-335, 349*

Orleans 149, 156-157, 171-172

Pekin Trench 366, 379, 381
Pilckem 243-245, 318, 331, 334, 346, 354, 358
Pilckem Ridge 314, 318-319, 358
Poelcappelle 241-242
Potijze 248, 253, 255-256, 322

Quarrie, The 366, 370-371, 375, 378-379, 382-383, 385, 388, 413, 418, 431, 433
Quetta 113, 368, 383

Red Sea 148, 156, 170
Rue d'Ouvert 202, 267, 276
Russia 34-35, 54, 73, 409

St. Eloi 209, 313-314
St. Jean 239, 241-243, 248, 255
St.Jean 241
St. Julien 132, 209, 215, 219-221, 224, 242, 248
St. Omer 163, 364, 367
Salonika xxvii, 82, 89, 94, 97, 99, 101, 123
Sandhurst 213, 368, 370
Somme, Battle of the xxiv, xxvi, 68, 77, 109, 114, 124, 148, 177, 203, 257, 361, 407, 411, 420, 431, 433
South Africa 44, 205, 208, 211-213, 320
Southern Sap 337, 341, 343
Southport 283, 303-304, 306-311
Staden 314-315, 325, 327
Steenstraat 209, 241, 314
Südspitze 329, 340-341, 348
Suez Canal 123, 148, 156
Suvla Bay 122, 363, 365

Trois Cabarets 379-380
Turco Farm 243, 247, 253, 315

Verlorenhoek 242, 256, 322
Vermelles 110, 165, 366, 369, 372, 375, 416, 420, 425
Vimy Ridge, Battle of 58, 125, 193, 260-261, 279, 396, 409, 430-431
Vlamertinghe 164, 249, 255-256

Whitehall 80-81, 83, 86, 95, 410
Wieltje 215, 220, 242-243, 245, 253
Woolwich 61, 64, 70, 74-75, 77, 79, 361, 368

Ypres 48, 58, 136, 162-164, 184, 187-188, 193, 209, 211-212, 214, 217, 225, 239, 241-245, 249-251, 253-257, 260, 280, 312-315, 320, 325, 327, 334, 347, 359
  Ypres Salient 48, 209, 239, 313
  First Battle of Ypres 40-41, 91, 116, 149, 257, 259
  Second Battle of Ypres v-vi, viii, xxix, 89, 106, 120, 132, 149, 162, 187, 204-206, 210, 213, 216, 224, 226-227-228, 239, 250-252, 259, 267, 312, 315, 317, 321-322, 334, 355, 390
Yser Canal 242, 244, 247, 253, 312-314, 322, 329, 337

Zillebeke 136, 253, 411
Zonnebeke ix, 239-240, 244, 253-256

MILITARY UNITS

British

Armies:

First Army viii, 37, 48, 69, 77, 83, 88, 103, 107, 121, 130, 139, 154, 161, 163-165, 167, 183, 185, 188, 190, 192-195, 198-203, 260, 275, 278, 288, 291-292, 332, 362, 365, 374, 376, 378, 382, 384, 393, 395, 410, 412-414, 418, 421, 426, 428
Second Army 37, 48, 74, 76, 84, 114, 154, 161-164, 185, 187, 209, 227, 244, 249, 312, 314, 320-322, 332-333, 355-356, 358, 411
Fourth Army 58-59, 176

Corps:

Cavalry Corps 161, 167, 169
I Corps 103, 105, 107, 111, 117, 119, 121, 156, 159, 183-184, 188, 275, 288, 362, 365-366, 368-371, 374-375, 384-385, 413
II Corps 75, 152-153, 411
III Corps 75, 127, 315, 403
IV Corps viii, 103, 111, 116, 183, 186-188, 191-196, 201-202, 365-366, 371, 375, 390, 394-396, 410, 413, 431
V Corps 162, 164, 215, 218, 221, 244, 255, 319-326, 340, 355
VI Corps 118, 315, 319-322, 324-325, 333, 340, 355-356
X Corps viii, 119, 166,
XI Corps x, 119, 122, 376, 412-413, 415-416, 418, 426, 428, 430, 434

Divisions:

Guards Division 382, 412, 429, 433
1st Division 196, 261, 287, 289, 366, 373, 375, 431
2nd Division ix, xxix, 103-107, 110-111, 116-119, 121, 123, 153-154, 156-158, 161, 163, 165-167, 169, 172, 195-196, 223, 259, 261-264, 266, 269, 271-273, 275, 283, 286-287, 291, 366, 375, 380-381
3rd Division 287, 320-321
4th Division x, 114, 119, 224, 287, 316, 321-323, 325-326, 327, 331, 333, 335, 337, 340, 342, 348, 352, 355, 357
5th Division 53, 123, 165, 236
6th Division 326, 333, 355
7th Division viii, 40, 44, 47, 122, 185-186, 191, 198-200, 259, 261-262, 268-269, 271-273, 291, 306, 361, 366, 368-372, 375, 378-379, 383-388, 415-416
8th Division viii, 122, 184-185, 191, 194-196, 198, 390-391, 393, 396-398, 401-402, 405-407
9th (Scottish) Division 43, 118, 259, 361, 366, 368-376, 379, 382, 384-386, 388-389, 415-416, 420, 425, 428
11th Division 110, 116, 209
12th (Eastern) Division 384, 412, 418, 428-429, 431
15th (Scottish) Division x, 45, 47, 366, 380
21st Division 44, 50, 389, 416
24th Division 44, 50, 116, 389, 416
27th Division 40, 215, 217, 222, 241, 245, 253
28th Division 40, 212, 215, 217, 219, 221, 238-239, 241, 253
46th (North Midland) Division x, 320, 408, 410-412, 414-415, 417-418, 421, 424-426, 428-433, 435-436
47th (London) Division 44, 110, 261, 275-276, 278, 289, 366, 410
49th Division 324, 329, 337, 352
51st Division 259, 261, 287
55th (West Lancashire) Division 228, 233, 235, 287, 306-307, 310

Brigades:

4th (Guards) Brigade 111, 120, 273
5th Brigade ix, 117, 120, 262, 265-266, 268, 272, 280
6th Brigade 104, 108, 110, 120, 262-263, 265, 272, 291, 293, 300, 304, 306

10th Brigade 247-248, 328, 331, 333, 343, 347, 352, 411
11th Brigade x, 254, 321, 327-331, 343, 347-348, 351-353, 355
13th Brigade 244-245, 368
20th Brigade 262, 268-269, 271-272, 378-379, 385
21st Brigade 199, 273, 378-379
22nd Brigade 262, 268-269, 271-272, 306, 378-379
24th Brigade 399-400, 402
25th Brigade x, 394, 399-402, 404
26th Brigade 372, 379-382
27th Brigade 372, 380, 382, 384
28th Brigade 372-373, 379, 381-382
83rd Brigade 238, 249, 254-256
137th Brigade 411, 416, 426-429, 431-433
138th Brigade 411, 416, 426, 428-429, 431, 433
139th Brigade 411, 416, 428-431
150th (York and Durham) Brigade 217, 220-222

Regiments:

6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons viii, 147-148, 150, 153, 156-159, 162-163, 165-166, 168-169, 172-173, 182
8th (Queen's Royal Irish) Hussars 82, 166-167, 180
King's Dragoon Guards 156, 159-160, 165-166, 181
Black Watch 71, 179, 379, 381
Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment) 218, 241-243, 245
Cameron Highlanders 273-274, 379-380, 415
East Lancashire Regiment 328, 331-332, 335, 342-343, 346, 356, 368, 400
East Yorkshire Regiment 242, 245-247, 249, 252-257
Gordon Highlanders 118, 271, 378-379, 381
Grenadier Guards 271, 273-274
Highland Light Infantry 110-111, 178, 265, 380-381
Hampshire Regiment 317, 328, 343, 347, 350, 352-356
King's Liverpool Regiment ix, xxix, 282-5, 287, 289-291, 295-296, 298, 300-301, 303, 305-307, 309, 311
King's Own Lancaster Regiment viii, ix, xxix, 228-230, 232-236, 238, 240-249, 251-257
King's Own Scottish Borderers 248, 380-381
King's Royal Rifle Corps 120, 262-264, 295, 411
Lancashire Fusiliers ix, 287, 316, 328, 343, 348-353, 356
Leicestershire Regiment 75, 179, 262, 267-268, 416, 420, 426-428
Lincolnshire Regiment x, 390, 394, 400, 402, 411, 416-417, 420, 426, 428, 431
London Regiment 42, 110, 270, 276, 278, 289, 400
Middlesex Regiment 241-243, 245-247, 400
Monmouthshire Regiment 238-239, 255-256, 411, 428
North Staffordshire Regiment 416-417, 426-427
Queen's Regiment 262, 269-270, 378
Rifle Brigade 254, 324-329, 331-332, 335, 337-338, 342-343, 345-350, 355-357, 359, 370, 400, 402
Royal Berkshire Regiment 121, 262, 264, 295, 305, 400, 402
Royal Fusiliers 118, 207, 223, 400
Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers ix, 110-111, 262, 266
Royal Warwickshire Regiment 269-270, 316, 328, 343, 348-349, 356, 378
Royal Welch Fusiliers 39, 262, 269-270, 378
Seaforth Highlanders 42, 178, 333, 377, 379-380
Scots Guards 262, 270-271
Scottish Rifles 380-381, 390, 403
Sherwood Foresters 76, 400, 430
Somerset Light Infantry 316-317, 328, 330, 335, 338, 342-343, 345, 347, 348, 350, 355-356, 411

South Staffordshire Regiment 269-271, 305, 378, 416, 426-427
West Yorkshire Regiment 329, 338-339, 343
Worcestershire Regiment 110, 118, 262, 265
York & Lancaster Regiment 242-243, 245, 248-249, 252, 254, 353, 359

Other Units & Formations
Royal Artillery xxv, 65, 74, 103, 105, 128-129, 132, 200, 281, 435
Royal Field Artillery (RFA) 110, 177, 331, 337,420
Royal Horse Artillery 147-148, 151, 154, 164-165, 169, 181-182
XXXII Field Artillery Brigade 325, 332, 342
Royal Engineers 57, 66-67, 70-71, 75, 181-182, 238, 315, 330, 332-333, 337, 339, 345-346, 361, 367-368, 377, 388, 400, 404, 428
Royal Flying Corps (RFC) xxviii, 125-142, 144-145, 263, 325, 341, 436
First Wing (1st Wing), RFC 130, 133, 139, 263
3 Squadron, RFC 128-129, 135, 144
16 Squadron, RFC 129-130, 133, 135-136
Geddes Detachment 218, 242, 247, 251, 257
Territorial Force (TF) 41-42, 228-229, 231-235, 251, 257, 286, 310, 436
Territorials vii, xxv, 42-43, 108, 228-231, 238, 246-247, 250, 252, 257, 286-288, 307, 310, 352, 354, 428, 433-434, 436
Territorial battalions 41, 46, 108, 228, 238, 251, 282, 287-289, 310, 400
Territorial division 44, 259, 287, 289, 390, 410-411

Canadian Army

Divisions:
1st Canadian Division viii, xxix, 206, 215-216, 220, 227, 241-242, 259, 275-276, 278

Brigades:
1st (Canadian) Brigade 209, 223-224, 243, 247, 276
2nd (Canadian) Brigade viii, 209, 212, 216, 219, 221-223, 225-226, 242, 275-276
3rd (Canadian) Brigade viii, 209-211, 214, 217-218, 220-221, 225-226, 242, 274-275

Battalions:
1st Battalion 211, 219, 224, 243
2nd Battalion viii, 210-211, 217-218, 220, 224, 254
3rd Battalion 207, 211, 217-218, 220, 224, 277-278
4th Battalion 207, 211, 219, 243, 370
5th Battalion viii, 207, 210, 212, 219, 221-222, 225, 276
7th Battalion viii, 207, 212-213, 215-217, 220, 225
8th Battalion viii, 205, 207, 212-213, 216, 219, 221-222, 225-226
10th Battalion 207, 212-214, 217-219 220, 223, 276
13th Battalion viii, 207, 210-212, 219, 224
14th Battalion 211-212, 214, 220, 224, 274
15th Battalion 207, 211-212, 219-220, 225, 275
16th Battalion 207, 211-212, 217-219, 223, 225, 274-275
Queen's Own Rifles of Canada xv, 209, 211

Indian Army
Indian Army 41, 146-147, 149-151, 157, 171, 174, 177, 180-182, 399

Corps:
Indian Army Corps (IAC) 146, 148-149, 153-154, 156, 161, 167, 176-178
Indian Corps 48, 71, 75, 119, 183, 188, 191-193, 197-198, 201, 259, 261, 265, 267-268, 280, 399

Indian Cavalry Corps (ICC) 41, 148-149, 156-157, 161-162, 164-165, 167-169, 176-177, 180, 261
Indian Expeditionary Force "A" (IEFA) 41, 147-149, 157, 170, 172, 175-176

Divisions:
1st Indian Cavalry Division viii, 147, 149, 154, 157-159, 161, 163-165, 168-169, 171, 182
2nd Indian Cavalry Division 148-149, 181
3rd (Lahore) Infantry Division ix, 41, 71, 147-149, 152-155, 161-162, 164-165, 167, 178, 248, 265, 268, 277
7th (Meerut) Infantry Division 41, 147-149, 152-155, 161, 178, 259, 262, 265, 267-268, 271, 280

Brigades:
7th (Meerut) Brigade [Cavalry] 149, 158-159, 161-163, 181
9th (Secunderabad) Cavalry Brigade 146, 148-149, 152, 154-155, 158-159, 170, 175, 180-182
Dehra Dun Brigade 178, 267-268, 272
Lucknow Brigade 157, 159, 165, 182
Meerut Brigade 149, 158-159, 161-163, 181
Mhow Brigade 149, 157-159, 162-163, 166, 168, 181-182
Sialkot Brigade 155, 159, 166
Sirhind Brigade 123, 178, 267, 300

Regiments:
15th Lancers (Cureton's Multanis) 147-148, 152-153, 157, 161-162, 164-165, 167, 176
34th Poona Horse 154-155, 157-159, 161, 165-166, 170, 175, 182

French Army:
French Army 31, 49, 84, 89, 365, 396, 410
Tenth Army (French) 58, 125, 167, 184, 260, 290, 362-363, 409-410, 430
IX Corps 184, 193, 260
XXXVI Corps 315, 325-326, 340

German Army:
German Army 32, 50, 56, 71, 86, 89, 112, 115, 201, 357
German High Command 58, 250, 334
Landsturm 347, 350, 357
Fourth Army (German) 58-59, 313
52nd Reserve Division (German) x, 340, 353, 358-359
Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 213 (RIR 213) 334-335, 345, 347, 350, 353, 356-357
Reserve Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 215 (*RIR 215*) 334, 344-345, 347-348, 351, 357

GENERAL

Admiralty 61, 66, 86
Armstrong 56, 61, 66
Army Council 59, 71, 85, 147

Bite and Hold 52-53, 186-187, 197, 200, 358, 391, 393
Boer War (South African War) 39, 44, 60-61, 80, 96, 104, 113, 150, 207, 212-213, 250, 368, 370, 390-391, 411, 418
Bombs and Grenades vii, ix, 46-47, 53-54, 56-57, 65, 67-79, 158, 169, 236, 264, 269-274, 276-277, 279, 301, 304, 329-331, 340-341, 344, 346-347, 350-351, 358-359, 368, 372, 374, 377, 380, 382, 386, 392, 395, 402-404, 423-426, 428, 435
Bootle Times 307-309
British Empire 35, 43, 90, 100, 115, 207, 209, 213, 258, 301, 368, 390

Cabinet, The (British) 31, 80, 83, 98-100, 204, 365
Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) 80, 94, 96-102

Dardanelles Committee 94, 99, 365
Decisive Battle 196-197, 199-200, 301, 366
Directorate of Artillery 57, 65, 71, 74

Field Service Regulations 187, 313, 414, 429
Formby Times ix, 283, 292, 295, 308-9

Gas 51, 63, 67, 106, 125, 132, 139, 162, 166, 205, 214, 219, 225, 241, 243, 249, 313, 315, 324, 330, 333, 335, 338-339, 344, 352, 357, 362, 365-368, 371, 373-378, 380-381, 385-390, 400, 408, 413-414, 417, 421-424, 426-427, 433, 435-436
General Staff 81, 85, 88, 94, 97-99, 101, 112-114, 186, 213, 368, 385, 388, 399
General Headquarters (GHQ) (British) 37, 57, 59-61, 67, 69-70, 75-76, 79, 82-83, 85-87, 89-94, 105, 107, 118-119, 122, 184, 187, 193, 195-199, 201-202, 249, 253-257, 287, 309, 325, 384, 421

High Command (British) vii, xxvii-xxviii, 97, 105-106, 115, 121, 201, 272, 362
Hurricane bombardment 45, 51, 198, 202, 397

Imperial General Staff (IGS) 58, 80, 95-96, 100

Lusitania, The 294-295, 302, 311

Militia Staff Course 208, 211, 213
Ministry of Munitions 56, 62, 64, 66-67, 79

New Army/New Armies vii, x, 38-39, 42-44, 70, 84, 109, 117-118, 234, 251, 257, 259, 359, 362-363, 369, 379, 389, 406-407, 433

Ordnance Board 57, 65, 69-71, 78

Regular Army 39-42, 46, 84, 107, 109, 116, 119, 206-209, 211-212, 219-220, 229-234, 236, 238, 245-246, 250-252, 257, 259, 282, 284, 286-289, 292, 307, 310-311, 314, 361-362, 368, 390, 398, 400, 410, 434
Royal Navy 32, 66, 82, 88, 90, 390
Royal Ordnance Factories 56, 60-63, 74, 76-77
Royal Ordnance Factory 56, 60-63, 74-77

Shell shortage xxviii, 45-47, 57-60, 81, 86-87, 91, 196, 280, 292, 313, 326, 358, 373, 393, 419
Silladar system 151, 174-175

Southport Guardian 283-284, 292, 308-310
Southport Visiter 308-310
Staff College 37, 83, 113, 116, 118, 121-122, 196, 207-208, 211-213, 220, 366, 368, 370, 383

Trench Mortars vii, 47, 53, 56-57, 65, 67-69, 71, 74-79, 103, 105, 158, 189, 267, 270-271, 273, 278-279, 290, 317, 324, 326-327, 329, 331, 333, 340-341, 353, 358, 370, 388, 396-397, 400, 404, 407, 423-424, 435
Trench Warfare Department (TWD) 66, 68-69, 71, 74, 77-79

Vickers vii, 56, 61, 66, 75-77, 137-138, 140-141, 153, 168

War Office xxvii, 38, 47, 56-57, 59, 61-62, 64-74, 76, 80-81, 85-86, 89, 93-97, 99-101, 147, 407
War Council 32, 34-35, 53-54, 83, 94, 101

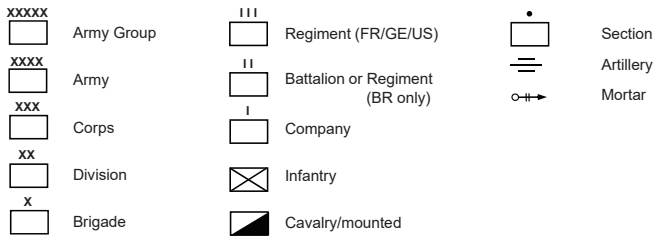
General Key for All Maps

Formation/Unit National Designators

Red	German
Blue	Allied
Alg	Algerian
BE	Belgian
BR	British
CAN	Canadian
DAB	Détachement d'Armée de Belgique
FR	French
IND	Indian
Bav	Bavarian
Col	Colonial (French)
Erz	Ersatz
Gd	Guards (British or German)
Ldw	Landwehr
Res	Reserve
Ter	Territorial (French)

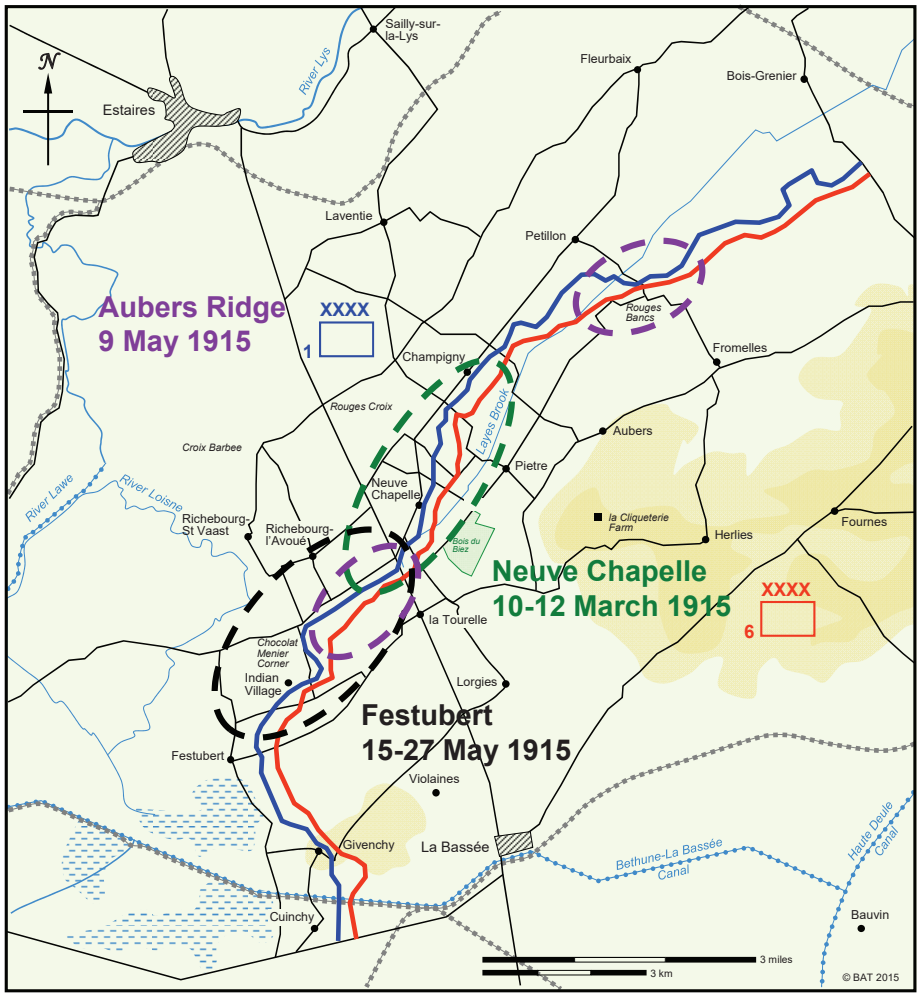
British and Dominion Regiments

BW	Black Watch
Border	Border Regiment
CH	Cameron Highlanders
Dev	Devonshire Regiment
E Lancs	East Lancashire Regiment
Essex	Essex Regiment
Garh	Garwhal Rifles
GH	Gordon Highlanders
Gurkh	Gurkha Rifles
HLI	Highland Light Infantry
HH	Hudson's Horse
Jats	Jat Regiment (India)
JH	Jacob's Horse
KDG	King's Dragoon Guards
KEO	King Edward's Own Cavalry
KOSB	King's Own Scottish Borderers
L	Lancers
Leic	Leicester Regiment
Linc	Lincolnshire Regiment
Middx	Middlesex Regiment
Mon	Monmouthshire Regiment
Norf	Norfolk Regiment
Northants	Northamptonshire Regiment
Queens	Royal West Surrey Regiment
RB	Rifle Brigade
RBks	Royal Berkshire Regiment
RIR	Royal Irish Rifles
RW	Royal Warwickshire Regiment
RWF	Royal Welch Fusiliers
SR	Scottish Rifles
SH	Seaforth Highlanders
SF	Sherwood Foresters
Som LI	Somerset Light Infantry
Suff	Suffolk Regiment
SStaffs	South Staffordshire Regiment
WY	West Yorkshire Regiment

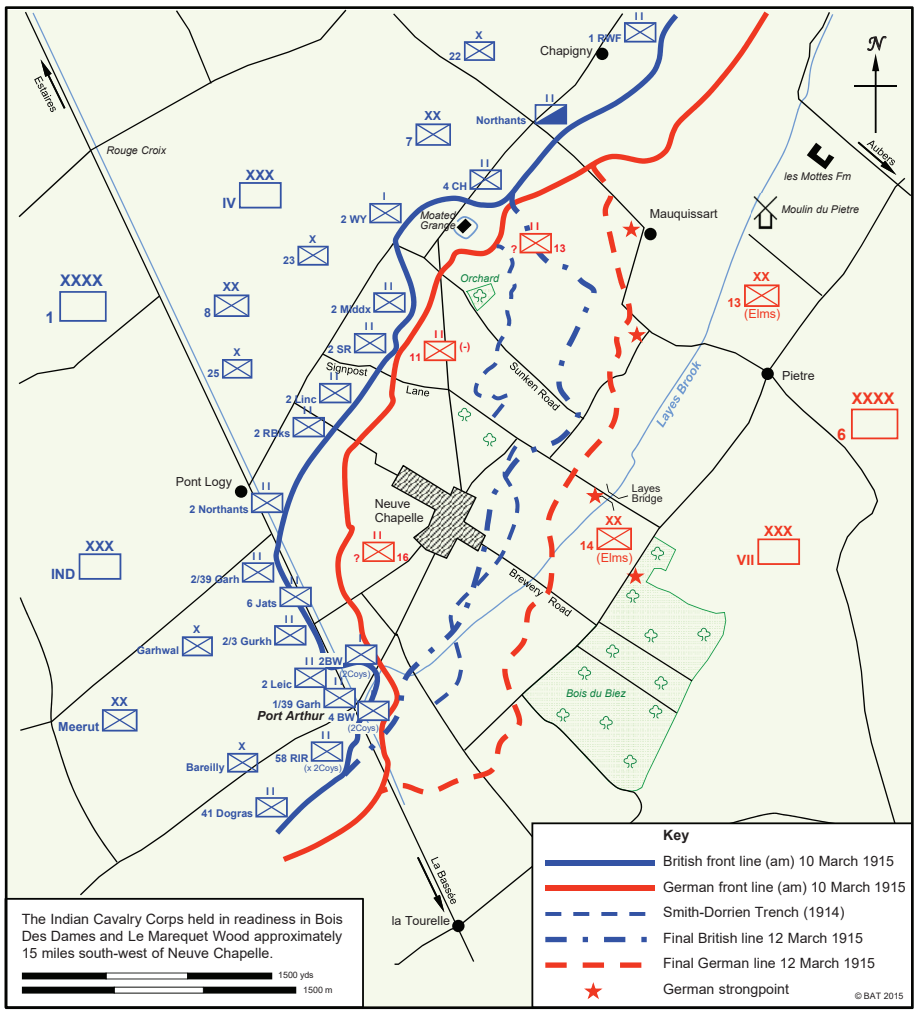


General Key

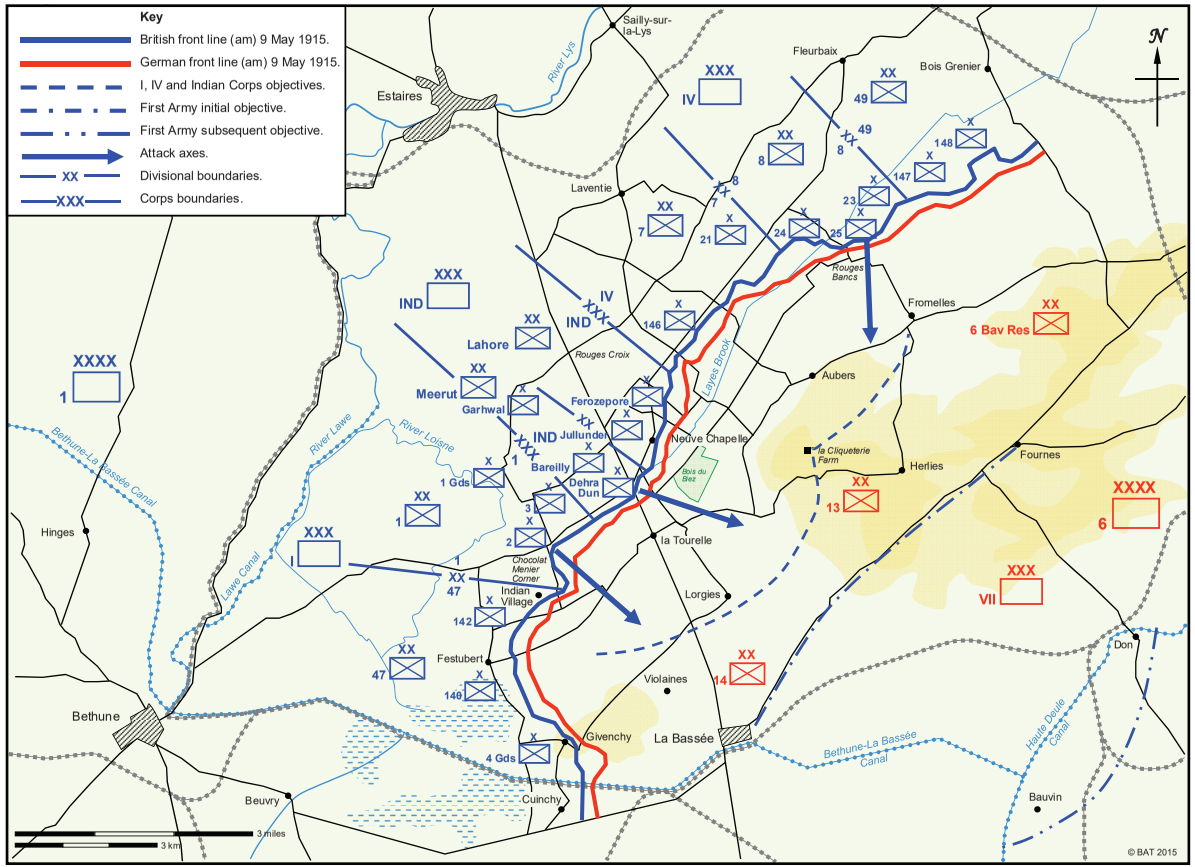
Map 1. Western Front 1915. The line had stabilised during the autumn and winter of 1914–15. Despite the best efforts of the Allies the Western Front would remain largely unchanged throughout 1915.



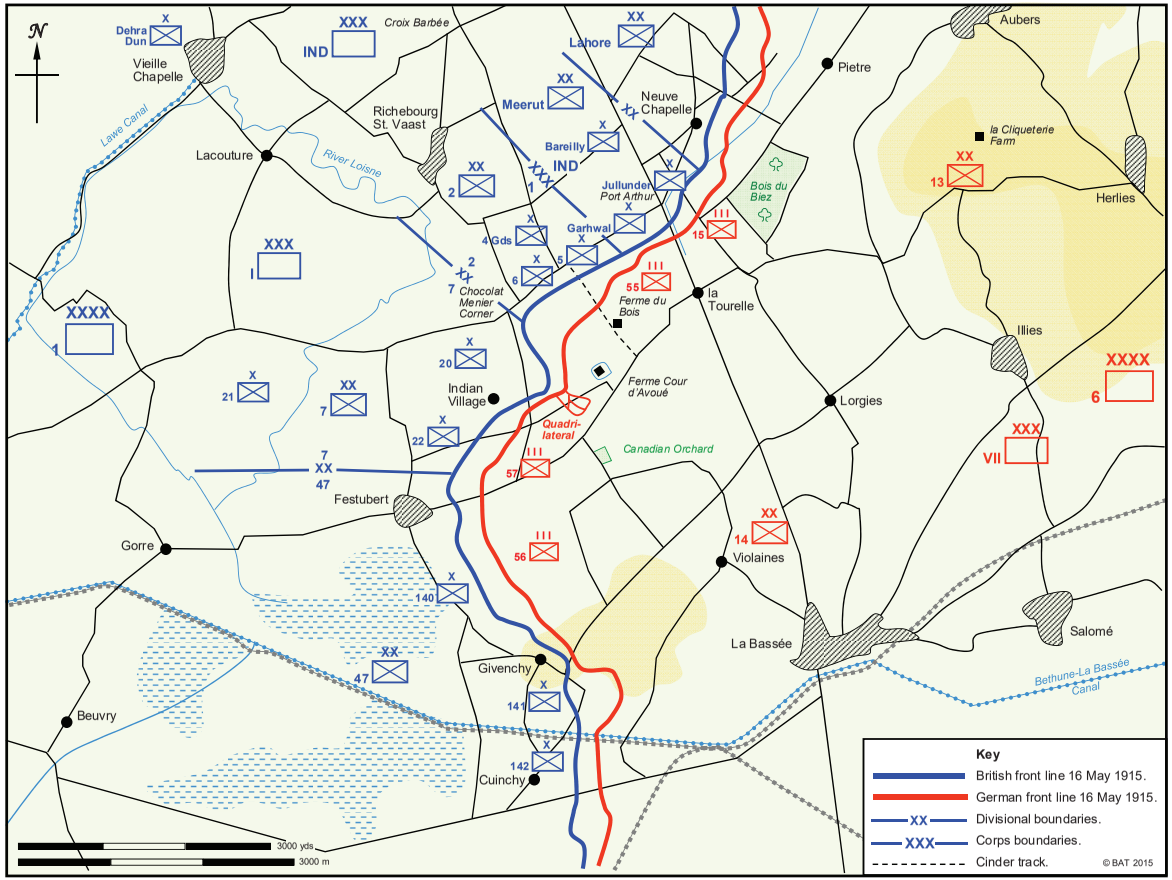
Map 2. First Army Offensives. British First Army launched three offensives between March and May 1915 with the overall objective of capturing the tactically important high ground of Aubers Ridge.



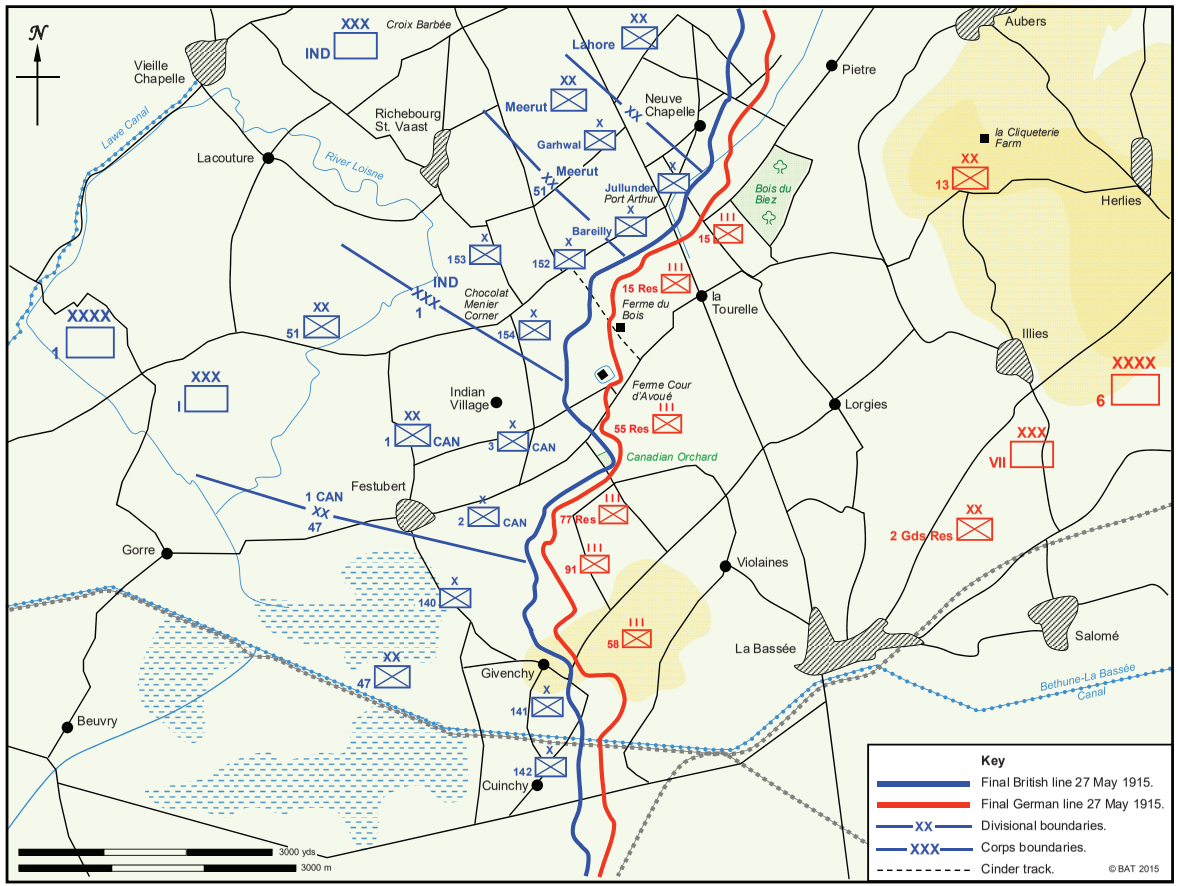
Map 3. Neuve Chapelle, 10–12 March 1915. A surprise hurricane bombardment and rapid advance allowed the British Army to capture the village on the first day. But attempts to push on towards Aubers Ridge failed and the battle degenerated into a stalemate.



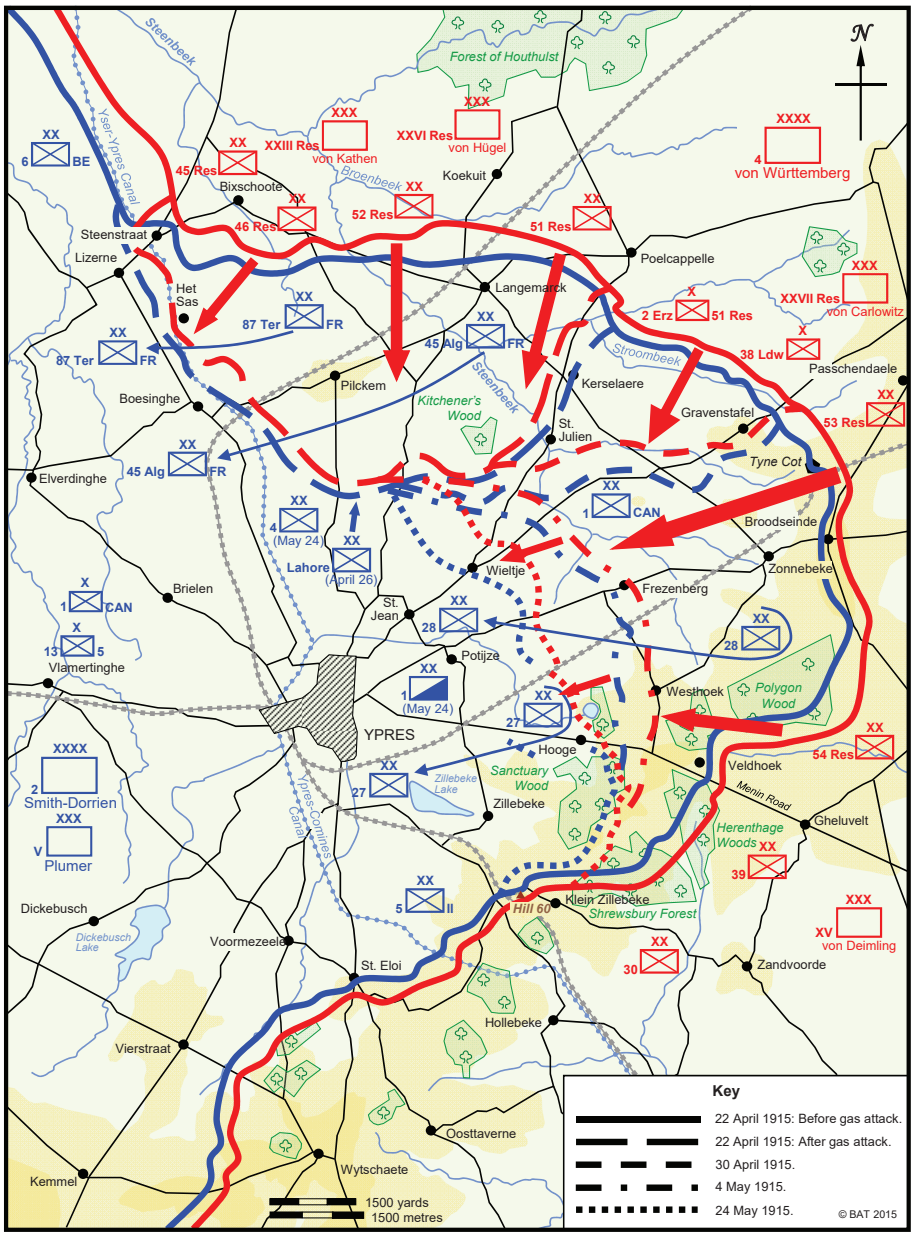
Map 4. Aubers Ridge, 9 May 1915. After a hurricane bombardment failed to dent German defences, British and Indian infantry advanced into uncut barbed wire and unshaken defenders. The result was an unmitigated disaster which cost the BEF over 10,000 casualties.



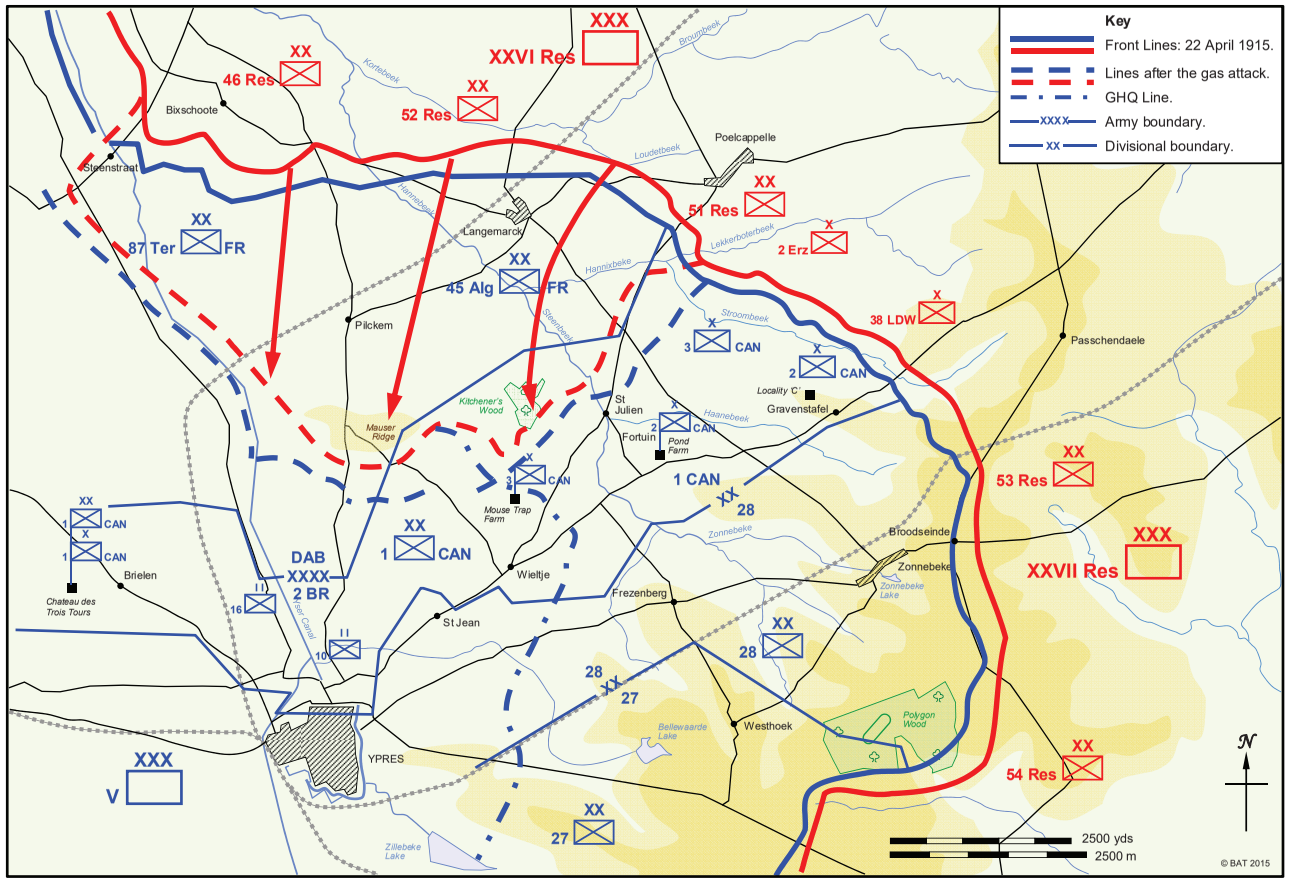
Map 5. Festubert, 15–27 May 1915. Positions at the opening of the offensive. After the disaster at Aubers Ridge the BEF attempted to renew the offensive with an ambitious night attack.



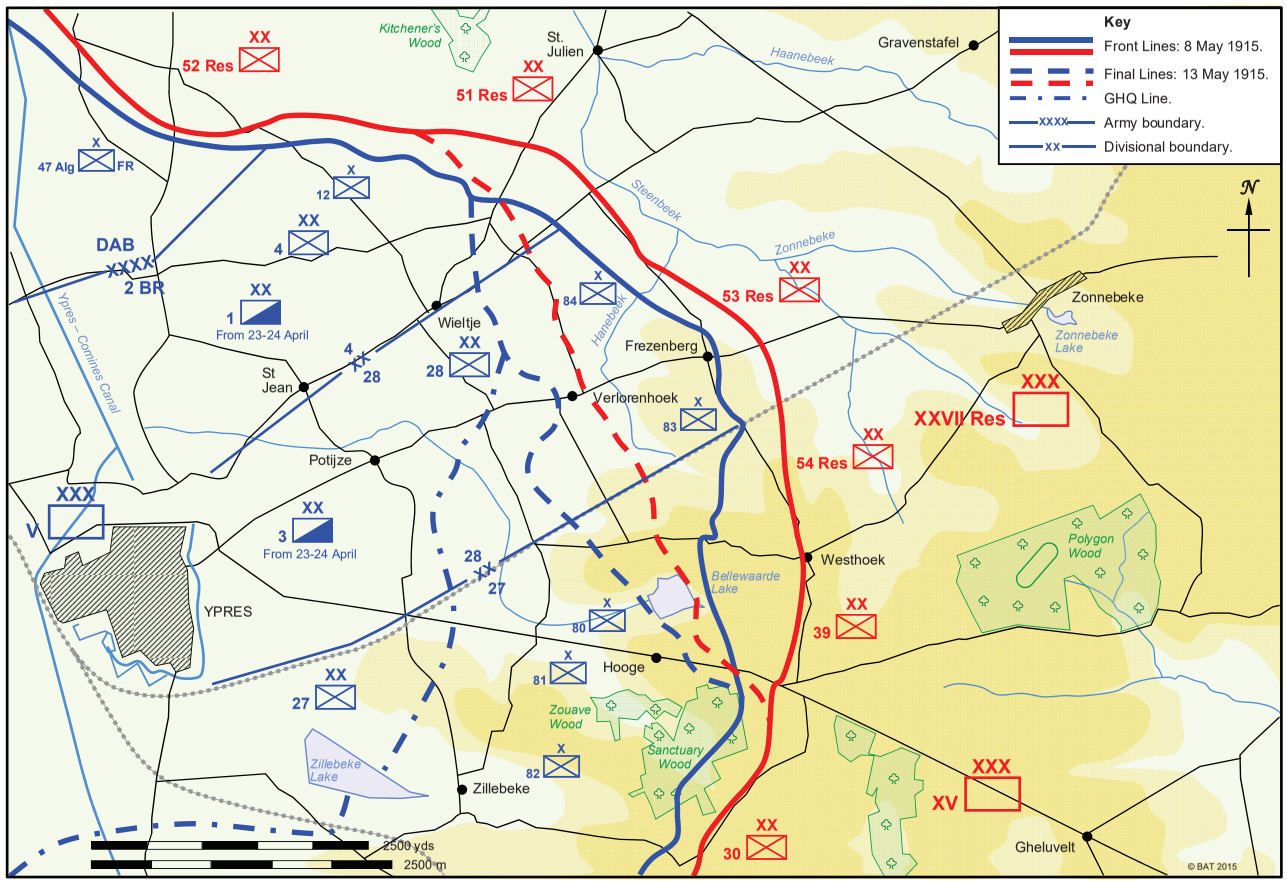
Map 6. Festubert, 15–27 May 1915. Final positions. The night attack on 15 May had achieved some success but it proved impossible to exploit the initial gains. Bitter fighting raged for a further week but there was little hope of achieving a breakthrough.



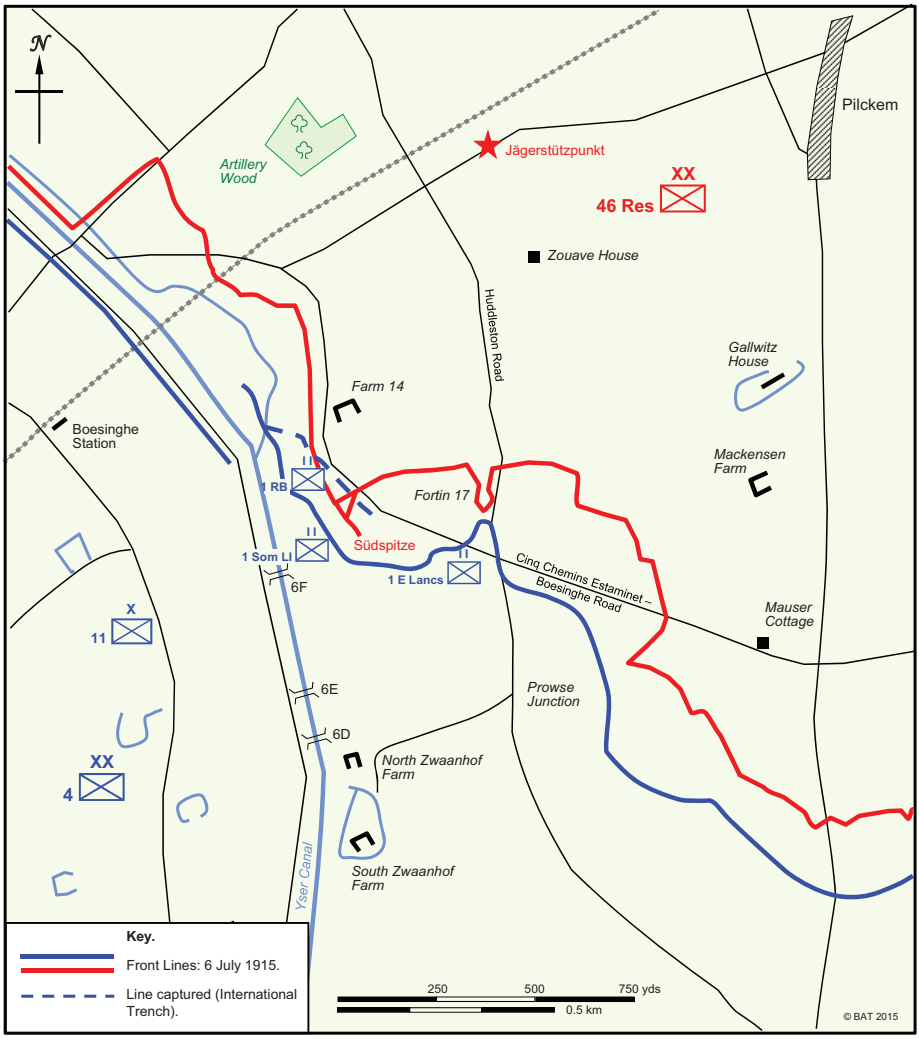
Map 7. Second Battle of Ypres. 22 April–25 May 1915. Whilst First Army launched its offensives to the south, Second Army found itself fighting for survival against a German offensive backed by the first large scale use of poison gas.



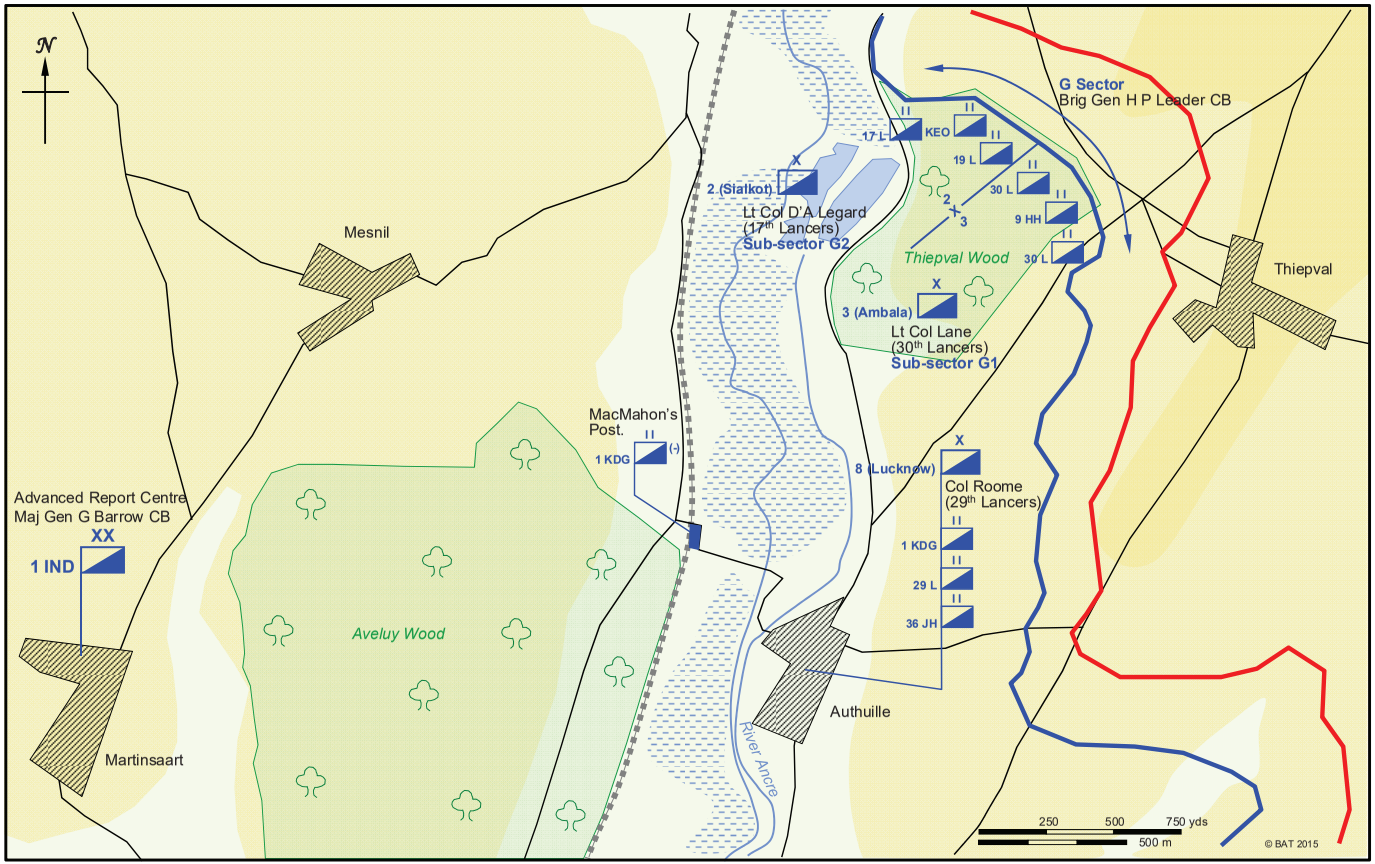
Map 8. First Day at the Second Battle of Ypres, 22 April 1915. A German assault using poison gas at the north edge of the salient made striking gains and was only halted after bitter fighting. This battle would be the Canadian Divison's baptism of fire.



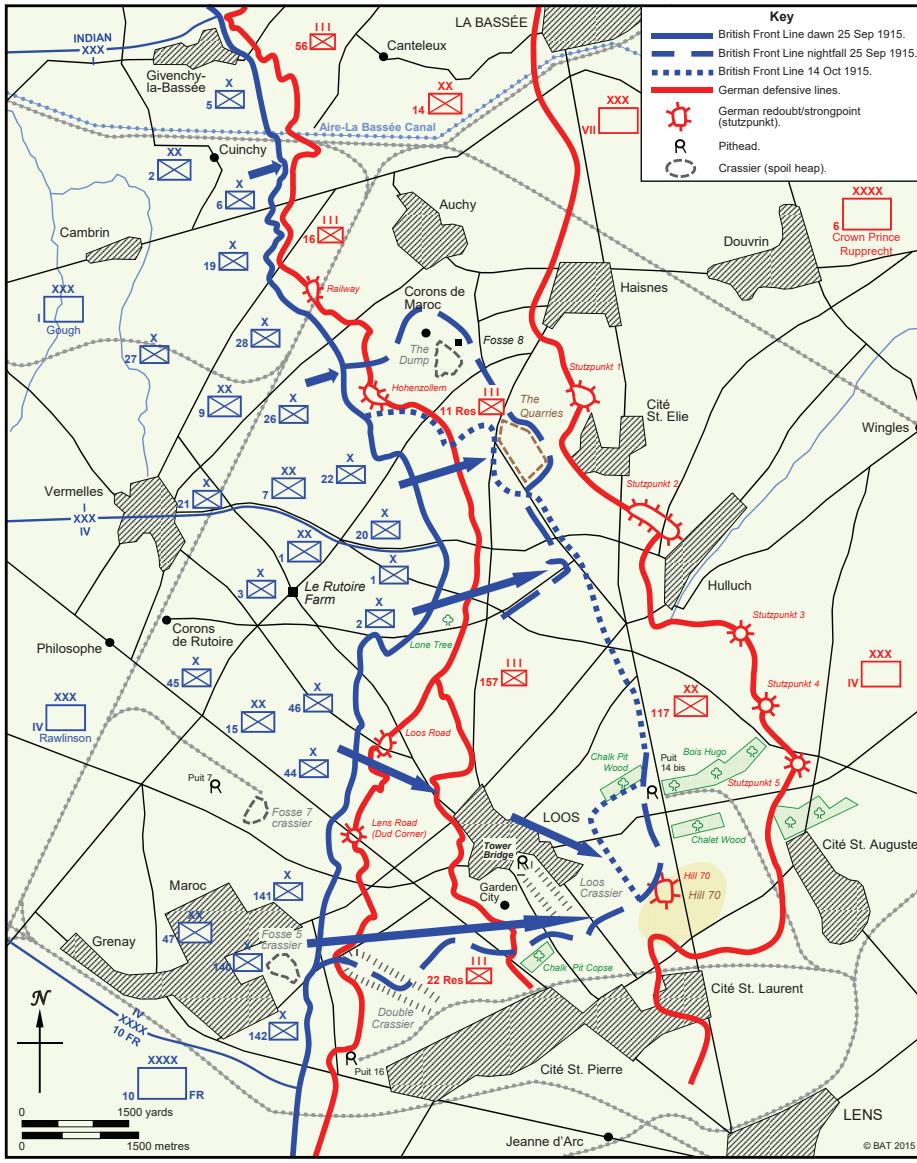
Map 9. The fighting for the Frezenberg Ridge, 9–13 May 1915. In the last major act of Second Ypres, British 27th and 28th Divisions fought to hold the high ground of the Frezenberg Ridge against a renewed German offensive.



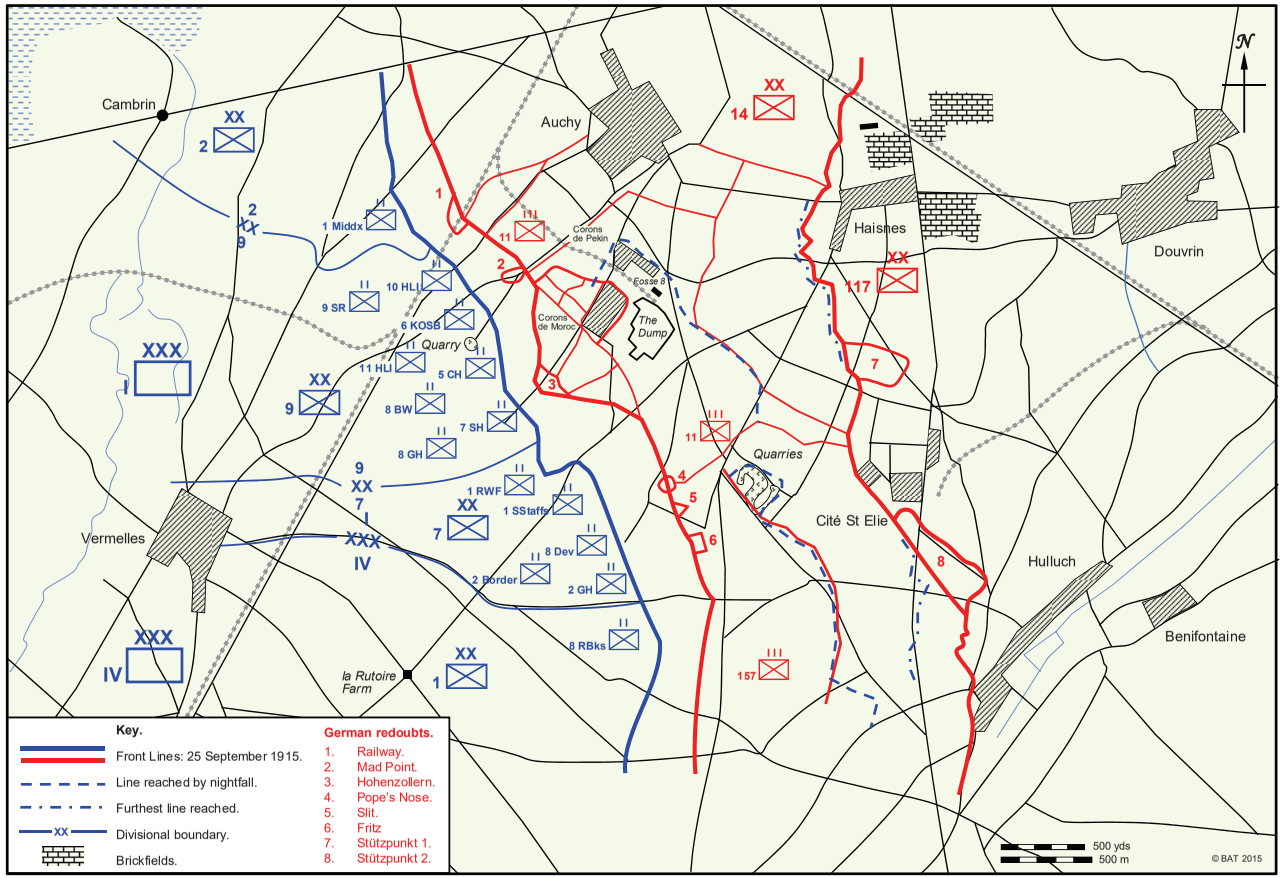
Map 10. The Battle for International Trench, July 1915. This small scale but bitterly fought action showed what the BEF could achieve when objectives matched resources.



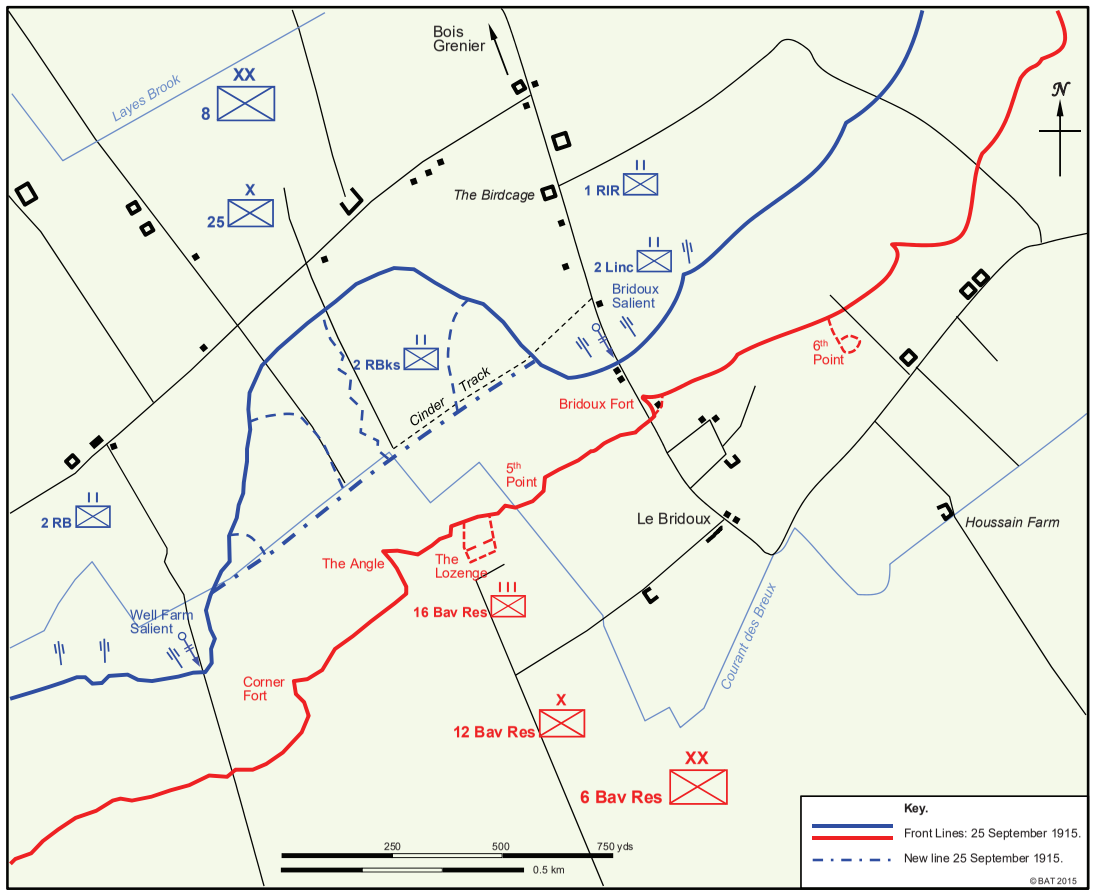
Map 11. 1st Indian Cavalry Division, August-September 1915. The BEF maintained its cavalry divisions throughout 1915 in the hope that they could be used to exploit a breakthrough.



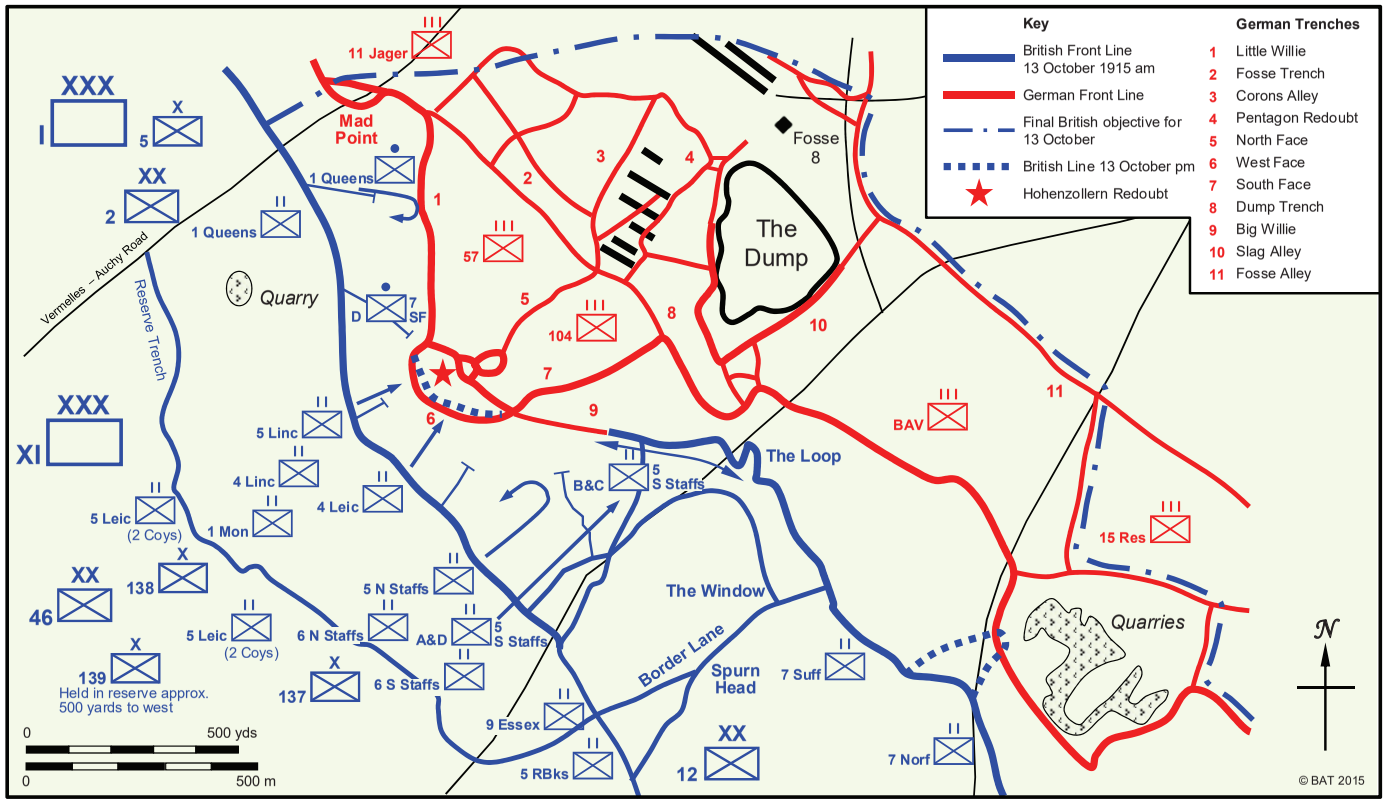
Map 12. The Battle of Loos, 25 September–13 October 1915. The largest BEF offensive of 1915 employed poison gas to compensate for inadequate artillery. The assault captured some important objectives, but heavy casualties, dismal weather and stiffening German resistance made it impossible to exploit any success.



Map 13. The Battle of Loos, 25 September 1915. Detail map showing the efforts of I Corps and IV Corps to capture the high ground of Fosse 8 and the Hohenzollern Redoubt. 9th (Scottish) Division seized this vital point on the first day but relentless German counterattacks had reclaimed it by the start of October.



Map 14. The Battle of Bois Grenier, 25 September 1915. A diversionary attack launched in support of the offensive at Loos, this bloody divisional level action revealed all the problems of trench fighting in 1915.



Map 15. The Assault on the Hohenzollern Redoubt, 13 October 1915. The last major British attack of the year resulted in a disaster as 46th (North Midland) Division advanced against unbroken German defences and suffered terrible losses as a result.

The year 1915 was one of unprecedented challenges for the British Army. Short of manpower, firepower and experience, the army needed time to adapt before it could hope to overcome the formidable German defences of the Western Front. Yet the insistent demands of coalition warfare required immediate and repeated action. The result was a year of disappointments, setbacks and costly fighting. The very difficulties of 1915 make it especially worthy of study. This book offers a fresh and insightful evaluation of the experience of the British Army through a series of thematic essays examining the strategic, operational, tactical and logistical problems that shaped the fighting. Within these pages are assessments of broad topics such as the performance of British high command, the 'Shell Scandal' and the development of the Royal Flying Corps, as well as a thorough selection of battle studies which cast new light on engagements such as Neuve Chapelle, Second Ypres, Festubert and Loos. Special attention is placed on the composite nature of the British Army, with chapters examining Canadian, Indian, Regular and Territorial unit experience. Taken as a whole these essays offer an important reassessment of a forgotten year of the war, and illustrate the tremendous difficulties faced by the British Army as it endured a bloody learning curve in difficult conditions. This book will be of great interest to anyone who studies the First World War, and of particular value to those who seek a greater understanding of the British Army of the era.

Dr Spencer Jones is Senior Lecturer in Armed Forces and War Studies at the University of Wolverhampton. He is the author of *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army 1902-1914* (2012) and the editor of *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914* (2013) and *At All Costs: The British Army on the Western Front 1916* (2018). Spencer has also authored the short history *The Great Retreat of 1914: From Mons to the Marne* (2014) and was co-editor (with Peter Tsouras) of *Over the Top: Alternate Histories of the First World War* (2014).

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